THE POET

BY

MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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By Meredith Nicholson

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OTHERWISE PHYLLIS. With frontispiece in color.

THE PROVINCIAL AMERICAN AND OTHER PAPERS.

A HOOSIER CHRONICLE. With illustrations.

THE SIEGE OF THE SEVEN SUITORS. With illustrations.

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON AND NEW YORK

THE POET

(p. 3)

POOR MARJORIE

THE POET

BY

MEREDITH NICHOLSON

WITH PICTURES BY FRANKLIN BOOTH
AND DECORATIONS BY W. A. DWIGGINS

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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PART
ONE

PART ONE

I

"THE lonesomeness of that little girl over there is becoming painful," said the Poet from his chair by the hedge. "I can't make out whether she 's too dressed up to play or whether it 's only shyness."

"Poor Marjorie!" murmured Mrs. Waring. "We 've all coaxed her to play, but she won't budge. By the way, that 's one of the saddest cases we 've had; it 's heartbreaking, discouraging. Little waifs like Marjorie, whose fathers

and mothers can't hit it off, don't have a fair chance, — they are handicapped from the start. — Oh, I thought you knew; that's the Redfields' little girl."

The Poet gazed with a new intentness at the dark-haired child of five who stood rigidly at the end of the pergola with her hands clasped behind her back. The Poet All the People Loved was a philosopher also, but his philosophy was not quite equal to forecasting the destiny of little Marjorie.

"Children," he observed, "should not be left on the temple steps when the pillars of society crack and rock; the good fairies ought to carry them out of harm's way. Little Marjorie looks as though she had never smiled." And then he murmured with characteristic self-mockery, —

"Oh, little child that never smiled —

Somebody might build a poem around that line, but I hope nobody ever will! If that child

does n't stop looking that way, I shall have to cry or crawl over there on my knees and ride her pickaback."

Mrs. Waring's two daughters had been leading the children in a march and dance that now broke up in a romp; and the garden echoed with gleeful laughter. The spell of restraint was broken, and the children began initiating games of their own choosing; but Marjorie stood stolidly gazing at them as though they were of another species. Her nurse, having failed to interest her sad-eyed charge in the games that were delighting the other children, had withdrawn, leaving Marjorie to her own devices.

"She 's always like that," the girl explained with resignation, "and you can't do anything with her."

A tall, fair girl appeared suddenly at the garden entrance. The abrupt manner of her coming, the alert poise of her figure, as though

she had been arrested in flight and had paused only for breath before winging farther, interested the Poet at once.

She stood there as unconscious as though she were the first woman, and against the white gate of the garden was imaginably of kin to the bright goddesses of legend. She was hatless, and the Poet was grateful for this, for a hat, he reflected, should never weigh upon a head so charming, so lifted as though with courage and hope, and faith in the promise of life. A tennis racket held in the hollow of her arm explained her glowing color. Essentially American, he reflected, this young woman, and worthy to stand as a type in his thronging gallery. She so satisfied the eye in that hesitating moment that the Poet shrugged his shoulders impatiently when she threw aside the racket and bounded across the lawn, darting in and out among the children, laughingly eluding small hands thrust out to catch her,

and then dropped on her knees before Marjorie. She caught the child's hands, laughed into the sad little face, holding herself away so that the homesick, bewildered heart might have time to adjust itself, and then Marjorie's arms clasped her neck tightly, and the dark head lay close to the golden one.

There was a moment's parley, begun in tears and ending in laughter; and then Marian tripped away with Marjorie, and joined with her in the mazes of a dance that enmeshed the whole company of children in bright ribbons and then freed them again. The Poet, beating time to the music with his hat, wished that Herrick might have been there; it was his habit to think, when something pleased him particularly, that "Keats would have liked that!" — "Shelley would have made a golden line of this!" He felt songs beating with eager wings at the door of his own heart as his glance followed the fair girl who had so easily

turned a child's tears to laughter. For Marjorie was laughing with the rest now; in ten minutes she was one of them — had found friends and seemed not to mind at all when her good angel dropped out to become a spectator of her happiness.

"I have saved my trousers," remarked the Poet to Mrs. Waring, who had watched the transformation in silence; "but that girl has spoiled her frock kneeling to Marjorie. I suppose I could n't with delicacy offer to reimburse her for the damage. If there were any sort of gallantry in me I would have sacrificed myself, and probably have scared Marjorie to death. If a child should put its arms around me that way and cry on my shoulder and then run off and play, I should be glad to endow laundries to the limit of my bank account. If the Diana who rescued Marjorie has another name —"

"I thought you knew! That's Marian Agnew, Marjorie's aunt."

"I 've read of her in many books," said the Poet musingly, "but she 's an elusive person. I might have known that if I would sit in a pleasant garden like this in June and watch children at play, something beautiful would pass this way."

Mrs. Waring glanced at him quickly, as people usually did to make sure he was not trifling with them.

"You really seem interested in the way she hypnotized Marjorie! Well, to be quite honest, I sent for her to come! She was playing tennis a little farther up the street, but she came running when I sent word that Marjorie was here and that we had all given her up in despair."

"My first impression was that she had dropped down from heaven or had run away from Olympus. Please don't ask me to say which I think likelier!"

"I'm sorry to spoil an illusion, but after all Marian is one of the daughters of men; though

I remember that when she was ten she told me in solemn confidence that she believed in fairies, because she had seen them — an excellent reason! She graduated from Vassar last year, and I have an idea that college may have shaken her faith in fairies. She 's going to begin teaching school next fall,— she has to do something, you know. She 's an eminently practical person, blessed with a sound appetite, and she can climb a rope, and swim and play tennis all day."

"The Olympians ate three meals a day, I imagine; and we should n't begrudge this fair-haired Marian her daily bread and butter. Let me see; she 's Marjorie's aunt; and Marjorie's father is Miles Redfield. I know Redfield well; his wife was Elizabeth Agnew. I saw a good deal of them in their early married days. They 've agreed to quit — is that the way of it?"

"How fortunate you are that people don't

tell you gossip! I suppose it's one of the rewards of being a poet! The whole town has been upset by the Redfields' troubles; — they have separated. I 've sent Elizabeth up to Waupegan to open my house — made an excuse to get her away. Marjorie's with her grandmother, waiting for the courts to do something about it; — as though courts could do anything about such cases!" she ended with feeling.

The Poet, searching for Marjorie in the throng of children, made no reply.

"You are a poet," Mrs. Waring resumed tauntingly, with the privilege of old friendship, "and have a reputation for knowing the human heart. Why can't you do something about the Redfields' troubles? — there 's a fine chance for you! It begins to look as though sentiment, romance, love — all those things you poets have been writing about for thousands of years — have gone out with the old-fashioned

roses. I confess that it 's because I 'm afraid that 's true that I 'm clinging to all the flowers my grandmother used to love — and I 'm nearly seventy and a grandmother myself."

She was still a handsome woman, and the Poet's eyes followed her admiringly as she crossed the lawn, leaving him to find an answer to her question. In the days of his beginnings she had been his steadfast friend, and he was fond of telling her that he had learned the kindliness and cheer he put into his poems from her.

She and her assistants were marshaling the children for refreshments under a canopy at the farther corner of the garden, and the animated scene delighted and charmed him. He liked thus to sit apart and observe phases of life, — and best of all he loved scenes like this that were brightened by the presence of children. He was a bachelor, but the world's children were his; and he studied them, loved them,

wrote for them and of them. He was quite alone, as he liked to be often, pondering the misfortunes of the Redfields as lightly limned by Mrs. Waring. Little Marjorie, as she had stood forlornly against the pergola, haunted him still in spite of her capitulation to the charms of her Aunt Marian. He knew perfectly well that Mrs. Waring had n't meant what she said in her fling about the passing of poetry and romance; she was the last woman in the world to utter such sentiments seriously; but he was aware that many people believed them to be true.

Every day the postman brought him letters in dismaying numbers from people of all sorts and conditions who testified to the validity of his message. The most modest of men, he found it difficult to understand how he reached so many hearts; he refused to believe himself, what some essayist had called him, "a lone piper in the twilight of the poets." With ma-

turity his attitude toward his own genius had changed; and under his joy in the song for the song's sake was a deep, serious feeling of responsibility. It was a high privilege to comfort and uplift so many; and if he were, indeed, one of the apostolic line of poets, he must have a care to keep his altar clean and bright for those who should come after him.

He was so deep in thought that he failed to observe Marian advancing toward him.

"If you please, I have brought you an ice, and there will be cake and bonbons," said the girl. "And Mrs. Waring said if you did n't mind I might sit and talk to you."

"You should be careful," said the Poet, taking the plate, "about frightening timid men to death. I was thinking about you so hard that my watch and my heart both stopped when you spoke to me."

"And this," exclaimed the girl, "from the poet of gracious words! I've been told that

I'm rather unexpected and generally annoying, but I did n't know I was so bad as that!"

"Then let us begin all over again," said the Poet. "Mrs. Waring told me your name and gave you a high reputation as an athlete, and spoke feelingly of your appetite. It 's only fair to give you a chance to speak for yourself. So kindly begin by telling me about Marjorie and why she 's so forlorn, and just what you said to her a while ago!"

The color deepened in the girl's face. It was disconcerting to be sitting beside the Poet All the People Loved and to be talking to him for the first time in her life; but to have him ask a question of so many obscure connotations, touching upon so many matters that were best left to whispering gossips, quite took her breath away.

"Not a word that I can remember," she answered; "but Marjorie said, 'Take me

home!'—and after she had cried a little she felt better and was glad to play."

"Of course that's only the most superficial and modest account of the incident," the Poet replied; "but I can't blame you for not telling. If I knew how to do what you did, I should very likely keep the secret. Another case of the flower in the crannied wall, —

> Little flower — but *if* I could understand
> What you are, root and all, and all in all,
> I should know what God and man is!"

"You give me far too much credit," the girl responded gravely. "It was merely a matter of my knowing Marjorie better than any one else at the party; I had n't known she was coming or I should have brought her myself."

"I thought you would say something like that," the Poet observed, "and that is why I liked you before you said it."

She looked at him with the frank curiosity

aroused by her nearness to a celebrity. Now that the first little heartache over the mention of Marjorie had passed, she found herself quite at ease with him.

"My feelings have been hurt," he was saying. "Oh, nobody has told me — at least not to-day — that I am growing old, or that it's silly to carry an umbrella on bright days! It's much worse than that."

Sympathy spoke in her face and from the tranquil depths of her violet eyes.

"I shall hate whoever said it, forever and forever!" she averred.

"Oh, no! That would be a very serious mistake! The person who hurt my feelings is the nicest possible person and one of my best friends. So many people are saying the same thing that we need n't ascribe it to any individual. Let us assume that I've been hurt by many people, who say that romance and old-fashioned roses are not what they were; that

such poetry as we have nowadays is n't of any use, and that we are all left floundering here

> As on a darkling plain,
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.

I want you to tell me, honestly and truly, whether you really believe that."

He was more eager for her reply than she knew; and when it was not immediately forthcoming a troubled look stole into his face. The readiness of the poetic temperament to idealize had betrayed him for once, at least, and he felt his disappointments deeply. The laughter of the children floated fitfully from the corner of the garden where they were arraying themselves in the tissue caps that had been hidden in their bonbons. A robin, wondering at all the merriment, piped cheerily from a tall maple, and a jay, braving the perils of urban life, winged over the garden with a flash of blue. The gleeful echoes from the bright can-

opy, the bird calls, the tender green of the foliage, the scents and sounds of early summer all spoke for happiness; and yet Marian Agnew withheld the reply on which he had counted. She still delayed as though waiting for the robin to cease; and when a flutter of wings announced his departure, she began irresolutely: —

"I wish I could say no, and I can't tell you how sorry I am to disappoint you — you, of all men! I know you would n't want me to be dishonest — to make the answer you expected merely to please you. Please forgive me! but I'm not sure I think as you do about life. If I had never known trouble — if I did n't know that faith and love can die, then I should n't hesitate. But I'm one of the doubting ones."

"I 'm sorry," said the Poet; "but we may as well assume that we are old friends and be frank. Please believe that I'm not bothering you in this way without a purpose. I think I

know what has obscured the light for you. You are thinking of your sister's troubles; and when I asked you what sorcery you had exercised upon little Marjorie, you knew her mother had been in my mind. That is n't, of course, any of my affair, in one sense; but in another sense it is. For one thing, I knew your sister when she was a girl — which was n't very long ago. And I know the man she married; and there was never any marriage that promised so well as that! And for another thing, I don't like to think that we've cut all the old moorings; that the anchorages of life, that were safe enough in old times, snap nowadays in any passing gust. The very thought of it makes me uncomfortable! You are not fair to yourself when you allow other people's troubles to darken your own outlook. When you stood over there at the gate, I called the roll of all the divinities of light and sweetness and charm to find a name for you; when you ran to Marjorie

and won her back to happiness so quickly, I was glad that these are not the old times of fauns and dryads, but that you are very real, and a healthy-minded American girl, seeing life quite steadily and whole."

"Oh, but I don't; I can't!" she faltered; "and does n't — does n't the mistake you made about me prove that what poets see and feel is n't reality, is n't life as it really is?"

"I object," said the Poet with a humorous twinkle, "to any such sacrifice of yourself to support the wail of the pessimists. I positively refuse to sanction anything so sacrilegious!"

"I'm not terribly old," she went on, ignoring his effort to give a lighter tone to the talk; "and I don't pretend to be wise; but life can't be just dreams and flowers: I see that! I wish it were that way, for everything would be so simple and easy and every one would live happy ever after."

"I'm afraid that is n't quite true," said the

Poet. "I can't think of anything more disagreeable than half an hour spent in a big hothouse full of roses. I've made the experiment occasionally; and if all creation lived in such an atmosphere, we should be a pale, stifled, anæmic race. And think of the stone-throwing there would be if we all lived in glass houses!"

She smiled at this; and their eyes met in a look that marked the beginnings of a friendship.

"There's Marjorie, and I must go!" she cried suddenly. "Is n't she quite the prettiest of them all in her paper cap! We have n't really decided anything, have we?" she asked, lingering a moment. "And I have n't even fed you very well, for which Mrs. Waring will scold me. But I hope you're going to like me a little bit — even if I am a heathen!"

"We were old friends when the stars first sang together! Something tells me that I shall see you soon again — very soon; but you have

not got rid of me yet; I crave the honor of an introduction to Marjorie."

In a moment the Poet stood with Marjorie close at his side, her hand thrust warmly and contentedly into his, while all the other children pressed close about. He was telling them one of the stories in rhyme for which he was famous, and telling it with an art that was not less a gift from Heaven than the genius that had put the words into his ink-pot. Thousands of children had heard that poem at their mothers' knees, but to-day it seemed new, even to those of the attentive young auditors whose lips moved with his, repeating the quaint, whimsical phrases and musical lines that seem, indeed, to be the spontaneous creation of any child who lisps them.

And when he began to retreat, followed by the clamorous company with demands for more, he slipped away through the low garden gate, leaned upon it and looked down upon

them with feigned surprise as though he had never seen them before.

"How remarkable!" he exclaimed, lingering to parley with them. "Tell you another story! Who has been telling stories! I just stopped to look at the garden and all the flowers jumped up and became children — children calling for stories! How very remarkable! And all the brown-eyed children are pansies and all the blue-eyed ones are roses, — really this is the most remarkable thing I ever heard of!"

They drew closer as he whispered: —

"You must do just what I tell you — will you promise, every single boy and girl?"

They pressed nearer, presenting a compact semicircle of awed faces, and nodded eagerly. An older boy giggled in excess of joy and in anticipation of what was to come, and his neighbors rebuked him with frowns.

"Now, when I say 'one,' begin to count, and count ten slowly — oh, very slowly; and then,

when everybody has counted, everybody stand on one foot with eyes shut tight and hop around real quick and look at the back wall of the garden — there's a robin sitting there at this very minute; — but don't look. Nobody must look — yet! And when you open your eyes there will be a fairy in a linen duster and a cocked hat; that is, *maybe* you'll see him! Now shut your eyes and count — one!"

When they swung round to take him to task for this duplicity, he had reached the street and was waving his hand to them.

II

Under the maples that arched the long street the Poet walked homeward, pondering the afternoon's adventures. His encounter with the children had sent him away from Mrs. Waring's garden in a happy mood. Down the long aisle of trees the tall shaft of the soldiers' monument rose before him. He had

watched its building, and the memories that had gone to its making had spoken to his imagination with singular poignancy. It expressed the high altitudes of aspiration and endeavor of his own people; for the gray shaft was not merely the center of his city, the teeming, earnest capital of his State; but his name and fame were inseparably linked to it. He had found within an hour's journey of the monument the material for a thousand poems. As a boy he had ranged the near-by fields and followed, like a young Columbus, innumerable creeks and rivers; he had learned and stored away the country lore and the country faith, and fixed in his mind unconsciously the homely speech in which he was to express these things later as one having authority. So profitably had he occupied his childhood and youth that years spent on "paven ground" had not dimmed the freshness of those memories. It seemed that by some magic he was able to cause

the springs he had known in youth (and springs are dear to youth!) to bubble anew in the crowded haunts of men; and urban scenes never obscured for him the labors and incidents of the farm. He had played upon the theme of home with endless variations, and never were songs honester than these. The home round which he had flung his defense of song domiciled folk of simple aims and kindly mirth; he had established them as a type, written them down in their simple dialect that has the tang of wild persimmons, the mellow flavor of the paw-paw.

He turned into the quiet street from which for many years he had sent his songs winging, — an absurdly inaccessible and delightful street that baffled all seekers, — that had to be rediscovered with each visit by the Poet's friends. Not only was its seclusion dear to him; but the difficulties experienced by his visitors in finding it tickled his humor. It was

pleasant to be tucked away in a street that never was in danger of precipitating one into the market-place, and in a house set higher than its neighbors and protected by an iron fence and a gate whose chain one must fumble a moment before gaining access to the whitest of stone steps, and the quaint door that had hospitably opened to so many of the good and great of all lands.

There was a visitor waiting — a young man who explained himself diffidently and seemed taken aback by the cordiality with which the Poet greeted him.

"Frederick Fulton," repeated the Poet, waving his hand toward a chair. "You are not the young man who sent me a manuscript to read last summer, — and very long it was, indeed, a poetic drama, 'The Soul of Eros.' Nor the one who wrote an ode in hexameters 'To the Spirit of Shelley,' nor yet the other one who seemed bent on doing Omar Khayyám

over again — 'Verses from Persian Sources' he called it. You need n't bother to repudiate those efforts; I have seen your name in the 'Chronicle' tacked to very good things — very good, and very American. Yes, I recall half a dozen pieces under one heading — 'Songs of Journeys' End' — and good work — excellent! I suppose they were all refused by magazines or you would n't have chucked them into a Sunday supplement. Oh, don't jump! I'm not a mind reader — it's only that I've been through all that myself."

"Not lately, though, of course," Fulton remarked, with the laugh that the Poet's smile invited.

"Not so lately, but they sent me back so much when I was young, and even after I was n't so young, that the account is n't balanced yet! There are things in those verses of yours that I remember — they were very delicate, and beautifully put together, — cobwebs with

dew clinging to them. I impudently asked about you at the office to make sure there really was a Frederick Fulton."

"That was kind and generous; I heard about it, and that emboldened me to come and see you — without any manuscript in my pocket!"

"I should like another handful like those 'Journeys' End' pieces. There was a rare sort of joy in them, exultance, ardor. You had a line beginning —

'If love should wait for May to come —'

that was like a bubble tossed into the air, quivering with life and flashing all manner of colors. And there was something about swallows darting down from the bank and skimming over the creek to cool their wings on the water. I liked that! I can see that you were a country boy; we learned the alphabet out of the same primer!"

"I have done my share of ploughing,"

Fulton remarked a little later, after volunteering the few facts of his biography. "There are lots of things about corn that have n't been put into rhyme just right; the smell of the upturned earth, and the whisper and glisten of young leaves; the sweating horses as the sun climbs to the top, and the lonesome rumble of a wagon in the road, and the little cloud of dust that follows and drifts after it."

"And little sister in a pink sunbonnet strolls down the lane with a jug of buttermilk about the time you begin to feel that Pharaoh has given you the hardest job in his brickyard! I've never had those experiences but" — the Poet laughed — "I've sat on the fence and watched other boys do it; so you're just that much richer than I am by your experience. But we must be careful, though, or some evil spirit will come down the chimney and tell us we're not academic! I suppose we ought to be threshing out old straw — you and I — writing of

English skylarks and the gorse and the yew and nightingales, instead of what we see out of the window, here at home. How absurd of us! A scientist would be caught up quick enough if he wrote of something he knew nothing about — if, for example, an astronomer ventured to write an essay about the starfish; and yet there are critics who sniff at such poetry as yours and mine" — Fulton felt that the laurel had been pressed down on his brows by this correlation — "because it's about corn and stake-and-rider fences with wild roses and elderberry blooming in the corners. You had a fine poem about the kingfisher — and I suppose it would be more likely to impress a certain type of austere critics if you'd written about some extinct bird you'd seen in a college museum! But, dear me, I'm doing all the talking!"

"I wish you would do much more. You've said just what I hoped you would; in fact, I came to-day because I had a blue day, and I

needed to talk to some one, and I chose you. I know perfectly well that I ought really to quit bothering my head about rhyme. I get too much happiness out of it; it's spoiling me for other things."

"Let's have all the story, then, if you really want to tell me," said the Poet. "Most people give only half confidences," he added.

"I went into newspaper work after I'd farmed my way through college. I've been with the 'Chronicle' three years, and I believe they say I'm a good reporter; but however that may be, I don't see my way very far ahead. Promotions are uncertain, and the rewards of journalism at best are not great. And of course I have n't any illusions about poetry — the kind I can do! I could n't live by it!"

He ended abruptly with an air of throwing all his cards on the table. The Poet picked up a paper-cutter and began idly tapping his knee with it.

"How do you know you can't!"

It was an exclamation rather than a question, and he smiled at the blank stare with which Fulton received it.

"Oh, I mean that it won't pay my board bill or buy clothes! It feeds the spirit, maybe, but that's all. You see, I'm not a genius like you!"

"We will pass that as an irrelevant point and one you'd better not try to defend. I agree with you about journalism, so we need n't argue that. But scribbling verses has taught you some things — the knack of appraising material — quick and true selection — and the ability to write clean straight prose, so you need n't be ungrateful. Very likely it has cultivated your sympathies, broadened your knowledge of people, shown you lights and shadows you would otherwise have missed. These are all worth while."

"Yes, I appreciate all that; but for the long future I must have a surer refuge than the

newspaper office, where the tenure is decidedly uncertain. I feel that I ought to break away pretty soon. I'm twenty-six, and the years count; and I want to make the best use of them; I'd like to crowd twenty years of hard work into ten and then be free to lie back and play on my little tin whistle," he continued earnestly. "And I have a chance to go into business; Mr. Redfield has offered me a place with him; he's the broker, you know, one of the real live wires and already very successful. My acquaintance with people all over the State suggested the idea that I might make myself useful to him."

The Poet dropped the paper-cutter, and permitted Fulton to grope for it to give himself time to think.

The narrow circumference within which the game of life is played had always had for the Poet a fascinating interest; and he read into coincidences all manner of mysteries, but it was nothing short of startling that this young man,

whom he had never seen before, should have spoken Miles Redfield's name just when it was in his own mind.

"I know Redfield quite well," he said, "though he's much younger than I am. I understand that he's prospering. He had somewhat your own problem to solve not so very long ago; maybe you don't know that?"

"No; I know him only in a business way; he occasionally has news; he's been in some important deals lately."

"It's odd, but he came to me a dozen years ago and talked to me much as you have been talking. Art, not poetry, was his trouble. He had a lot of talent — maybe not genius but undeniable talent. He had been to an art school and made a fine record, and this, he used to say jokingly, fitted him for a bank clerkship. He has a practical side, and most of the year could clean up his day's work early enough to save a few daylight hours for himself. There's a pen-

and-ink sketch of me just behind your head that's Miles's work. Yes; it's good; and he could pluck the heart out of a landscape, too; — in oils, I mean. He was full of enthusiasm and meant to go far. Then he struck the reefs of discouragement as we all do, and gave it up; got a job in a bank, got married — and there you are!"

"It 's too bad about his domestic affairs," Fulton volunteered, as the Poet broke off with a gesture that was eloquent with vague implications.

"He seems to have flung aside all his ideals with his crayons and brushes!" exclaimed the Poet impatiently. "Mind you, I don't blame him for abandoning art; I always have an idea that those who grow restless over their early failures and quit the game have n't heard the call very clearly. A poet named McPhelim once wrote a sonnet, that began —

'All-lovely Art, stern Labor's fair-haired child,—'

working out the idea that we must serve seven years and yet seven other years to win the crown. We might almost say that it's an endless apprenticeship; we are all tyros to the end of the chapter!"

"It must be the gleam we follow forever!" said the young man. "No matter how slight the spark I feel—I want to feel that it's worth following if I never come in sight of the Grail."

It was not the way of the Poet to become too serious even in matters that lay nearest his heart.

"We must follow the firefly even though it leads us into bramble patches and we emerge on the other side with our hands and faces scratched! It's our joke on a world that regards us with suspicion that, when we wear our singing robes into the great labor houses, we are really more practical than the men who spend their days there. I'm making that statement

in confidence to you as a comrade and brother; we must keep our conceit to ourselves; but it's true, nevertheless. The question at issue is whether you shall break with the 'Chronicle' and join forces with Miles Redfield; and whether doing so would mean inevitably that you must bid your literary ambitions get behind you, Satan."

Fulton nodded.

"Of course," he said, "there have been many men who first and last have made an avocation of literature and looked elsewhere for their daily bread: Lamb's heart, pressed against his desk in the India office, was true to literature in spite of his necessities. And poets have always had a hard time of it, stealing like Villon, or inspecting schools, like Arnold, or teaching, like Longfellow and Lowell; they have usually paid a stiff price for their tickets to the Elysian Fields."

The Poet crossed the room, glanced at the

portrait that Redfield had made of him, and then leaned against the white marble mantel.

"We 've wandered pretty far afield; we are talking as though this thing we call art were something quite detachable — something we could stand off and look at, or put on or off at will. I wonder if we won't reach the beginning — or the end — of the furrow we're scratching with our little plough, by agreeing that it must be in our lives, a vital part of us, and quite inseparable from the thing we are!"

"Yes; to those of high consecration — to the masters! But you are carrying the banner too high; my lungs were n't made for that clearer ether and diviner air."

"Let us consider that, then," said the Poet, finding a new seat by the window. "I have known and loved half a dozen men who have painted, — we will take painters, to get away from our own shop, — and have passed the meridian and kept on painting without gaining

any considerable success as men measure it; never winning much more than local reputation. They have done pot-boilers with their left hands, and not grumbled. They've found the picking pretty lean, too, and their lives have been one long sacrifice. They've had to watch in some instances men of meaner aims win the handful of silver and the ribbon to wear in their coats; but they've gone on smilingly; they are like acolytes who light tapers and sing chants without ever being summoned to higher service at the altar — who would scruple to lay their hands on it!"

"They, of course, are the real thing!" Fulton exclaimed fervently, "and there are scores of such men and women. They are amateurs in the true sense. I know some of them, and I take off my hat to them!"

"I get down on my knees to them," said the Poet with deep feeling. "Success is far from spelling greatness; it takes a great soul to find

success and happiness in defeat. You will have to elect whether you will take your chances with the kind of men I 've mentioned or delve where the returns are surer; and that's a decision you will have to make for yourself. All I can do is to suggest points for consideration. Quite honestly I will say that your work promises well; that it's better than I was doing at your age, and that very likely you can go far with it. How about prose — the novel, for example? Thackeray, Howells, Aldrich — a number of novelists have been poets, too."

"Oh, of course I mean to try a novel — or maybe a dozen of them! In fact," Fulton continued, after a moment's hesitation, "I'm working right now on a poetical romance with a layer of realism here and there to hold it together. It's modern with an up-to-date setting. I've done some lyrics and songs to weave into it. There's a poet who tends an orchard on the shore of a lake, — almost like Waupegan, —

and a girl he does n't know; but he sees her paddling her canoe or sometimes playing tennis near an inn not far from his orchard. He leaves poems around for her to find, tacked to trees or pinned to the paddle in her canoe; I suppose I 'm stealing from Rosalind and Orlando. She 's tall, with light brown hair, — there 's a glint of gold in it, — and she 's no end beautiful. He watches her at the tennis court — lithe, eager, sure of hand and foot; and writes madly, all kinds of extravagant songs in praise of her. The horizon itself becomes the net, and she serves her ball to the sun — you see he has a bad case! You know how pretty a girl is on a tennis court, — that is, a graceful girl, all in white, — a tall, fair girl with fluffy hair; a very human, wide-awake girl, who can make a smashing return or drop the ball with maddening ease just over the net with a quick twist of the wrist. There 's nothing quite like that girl — those girls, I should say!"

"I like your orchard and the lake, and the goddess skipping over the tennis court; but I fancy that behind all romance there's some realism. You sketch your girl vividly. You must have seen some one who suggested her; perhaps, if it is n't impertinent, you yourself are imaginably the young gentleman casually spraying the apple trees to keep the bugs off!"

It was in the Poet's mind that young men of poetical temperament are hardly likely to pass their twenty-sixth birthday without a love affair. He knew nothing of Fulton beyond what the young man had just told him, and presumably his social contacts had been meager; but his voluble description of his heroine encouraged a suspicion that she was not wholly a creature of the imagination.

"Oh, of course I've had a particular girl in mind!" Fulton laughed. "I've gone the lengths of realism in trying to describe her. I

was assigned to the Country Club to do a tennis tournament last fall, and I saw her there. She all but took the prize away from a girl college champion they had coaxed out from the East to give snap to the exhibition. My business was to write a newspaper story about the game, and being a mere reporter I made myself small on the side lines and kept score. Our photographer got a wonderful picture of her — my goddess, I mean — as she pulled one down from the clouds and smashed it over the net, the neatest stroke of the match. It seemed perfectly reasonable that she could roll the sun under her racket, catch it up and drive it over the rim of the world!"

"Her name," said the Poet, as Fulton paused, abashed by his own eloquence, "is Marian Agnew."

"How on earth did you guess that!" exclaimed the young man.

"Oh, there is something to be said for real-

ism, after all, and your description gave me all but her name. I might quote a poem I have seen somewhere about the robin —

'There's only one bird sings like that —
From Paradise it flew.'"

"I have n't heard her sing, but she laughed like an angel that day, — usually when she failed to connect with the ball; but she did n't even smile when the joke was on the other girl, — that's being a good sportsman! I rather laid myself out praising her game. But if you know her I shall burn my manuscript and let you do the immortalizing."

"On the other hand, you should go right on and finish your story. Don't begin to accumulate a litter of half-finished things; you'll find such stuff depressing when you clean up your desk on rainy days. As to Marian, you've never spoken to her?"

"No; but I've seen her now and then in the street, and at the theater, and quite a bit at

Waupegan last fall. She has plenty of admirers and does n't need me."

"I'm not so sure of that," the Poet replied absently.

"I must be going," said the young man, jumping up as the clock chimed six. "You've been mighty good to me; I shan't try to tell you how greatly I appreciate this talk."

"Well, we have n't got anywhere; but we've made a good beginning. I wish you'd send me half a dozen poems you have n't printed, in the key of 'Journeys' End.' And come again soon!"

He stood on the steps and watched the young fellow's vigorous stride as he hurried out of the tranquil street. Oftener than not his pilgrims left nothing behind, but the Poet was aware of something magnetic and winning in Fulton. Several times during the evening he found himself putting down his book to recur to their interview. He had not overpraised Fulton's

verses; they were unusual, clean-cut, fresh, and informed with a haunting music. Most of the young poets who sought the Poet's counsel frankly imitated his own work; and it was a relief to find some one within the gates of the city he loved best of all who had notched a different reed.

The Poet preferred the late hours for his writing. Midnight found him absorbed in a poem he had carried in his heart for days. Some impulse loosened the cords now; it began to slip from his pencil quickly, line upon line. It was of the country folk, told in the *lingua rustica* to which his art had given dignity and fame. The lines breathed atmosphere; the descriptive phrases adumbrated the lonely farmhouse with its simple comforts as a stage for the disclosure of a little drama, direct, penetrating, poignant. He was long hardened to the rejections of rigorous self-criticism, and not infrequently he cast the results of a night's

labor into the waste-paper basket; but he experienced now a sense of elation. Perhaps, he reflected, the various experiences of the day had induced just the right mood for this task. He knew that what he had wrought was good; that it would stand with his best achievements. He made a clean copy of the verses in his curiously small hand with its quaint capitals, and dropped them into a drawer to lose their familiarity against the morrow's fresh inspection. Like all creative artists, he looked upon each of his performances with something of wonder. "How did I come to do that in just that way? What was it that suggested this?" If it were Marjorie and Marian, or Elizabeth Redfield! . . . Perhaps young Fulton's enthusiasm had been a contributing factor.

This association of ideas led him to open a drawer and rummage among old letters. He found the one he sought, and began to read. It had been written from Lake Waupegan,

that pretty teacupful of blue water which, he recalled, young Fulton had chosen as the scene for his story. The Redfields had gone there for their honeymoon, and Elizabeth had written this letter in acknowledgment of his wedding gift. It was not the usual formula of thanks that brides send fluttering back to their friends; and it was because it was different that he had kept it.

"We are having just the June days that you have written about, and Miles and I keep quoting you, and saying over and over again, 'he must have watched the silvery ripple on the lake from this very point!' or, 'How did he know that clover was like that?' And how did you? . . . Miles brought his painting-kit, and when we're not playing like children he's hard at work. I know you always thought he ought to go on; that he had a real talent; and I keep reminding him of that. You know we've got a

little bungalow on the edge of Nowhere to go to when we come home and there'll be a line of hollyhocks along the fence in your honor. Miles says we've got to learn to be practical; that he does n't propose to let me starve to death for Art's sake! I'm glad you know and understand him so well, for it makes you seem much closer; and the poem you wrote me in that beautiful, beautiful Keats makes me feel so proud! I did n't deserve that! Those things are n't true of me — but I want them to be; I'm going to keep that lovely book in its cool green covers where I shall see it the first and last thing every day. Your lines are already written in my heart!"

The Poet turned back to the date: only seven years ago!

The sparrows under the eaves chirruped, and drawing back the blind he watched the glow of dawn spread through the sky. This was a

familiar vigil; he had seen many a dream vanish through the ivory portals at the coming of day.

III

A CERTAIN inadvertence marked the Poet's ways. His deficiencies in orientation, even in the city he knew best of all, were a joke among his friends. He apparently gained his destinations by good luck rather than by intention.

Incurable modesty made him shy of early or precipitate arrivals at any threshold. Even in taking up a new book he dallied, scanned the covers, pondered the title-page, to delay his approach, as though not quite sure of the author's welcome and anxious to avoid rebuff. The most winning and charming, the most lovable of men — and entitled to humor himself in such harmless particulars!

The affairs that men busied themselves with were incomprehensible to him. It was with

a sense of encroachment upon forbidden preserves that he suffered himself to be shot skyward in a tall office building and dropped into a long corridor whose doors bore inscriptions that advertised divers unfamiliar occupations to his puzzled eyes.

The poem that had slipped so readily from his pencil in the watches of the night had proved, upon inspection in the light of day, to be as good as he had believed it to be, but he carried it stowed away in his pocket, hoping that he might yet detect a shaky line that further mulling would better, before submitting it to other eyes.

This was a new building and he had never explored its fastnesses before. He was staring about helplessly on the threshold of Miles Redfield's office, where there was much din of typewriters, when his name was spoken in hearty tones.

"Very odd!" the Poet exclaimed; "very

odd, indeed! But this is the way it always happens with me, Miles. I start out to look for a dentist and stumble into the wrong place. I'm in luck that I did n't fall down the elevator shaft. I can't recall now whether it was the dentist I was looking for or the oculist."

"I hoped you were looking for me!" said Redfield; "it's a long time since you remembered my presence on earth!"

The typewriters had ceased to click and three young women were staring their admiration. The Poet bowed to them all in turn, and thus rubricated the day in three calendars! Redfield's manifestations of pleasure continued as he ushered the Poet into his private office. Nothing could have been managed more discreetly; the Poet felt proud of himself; and there was no questioning the sincerity of the phrases in which Redfield welcomed him. It was with a sense of satisfaction and relief that he soon found himself seated in a mahogany

chair by a broad window, facing Redfield, and listening to his assurances that this was an idle hour and that he had nothing whatever to do but to make himself agreeable to poets. The subdued murmur of the clicking machines and an occasional tinkle of telephones reached them; but otherwise the men were quite shut off from the teeming world without. Redfield threw himself back in his chair and knit his hands behind his head to emphasize his protestations of idleness.

"I have n't seen you since that last dinner at the University Club where you did yourself proud — the same old story! I don't see you as much as I did before you got so famous and I got so busy. I wish you'd get into the habit of dropping in; it's a comfort to see a man occasionally that you're not inclined to wring money out of; or who adds zest to the game by trying to get some out of you!"

"From all accounts you take pretty good

care of yourself. You look almost offensively prosperous; and that safe would hold an elephant. I suppose it's crammed full of works of art — some of those old etching-plates you used to find such delight in. I can imagine you bolting the door and sitting down here with a plate to scratch the urban sky-line. Crowd waiting outside; stenographers assuring them that you will appear in a moment."

"The works of art in that safe are engravings all right," laughed Redfield; "I've got 'em to sell, — shares of stock, bonds, and that sort of trash. I'll say to you in confidence that I'm pretty critical of the designs they offer me when I have a printing job to do. There's a traction bond I'm particularly fond of, — done from an old design of my own, — corn in the shock, with pumpkins scattered around. Strong local color! You used to think rather well of my feeble efforts; I can't remember that any one else ever did! Hence, as I rather like to eat, I

gave over trying to be another Whistler and here we are!"

"Rather shabby, when you come to think of it," laughed the Poet, "to spurn my approval and advice to keep on. If you 'd gone ahead —"

"If I had, I should be seizing a golden opportunity like this to make a touch — begging you for a few dollars to carry me over Saturday night! No; I tell you my talent was n't big enough; I was sharp enough to realize my limitations and try new pastures. Where a man can climb to the top, art 's all right; but look at McPherson, Banning, Myers, — these other fellows around here we 're all so proud of, — and where have they got? Why, even Stiles, who gets hung in the best exhibitions and has a reputation, barely keeps alive. I saw him in New York last week, and he was in the clouds over the sale of a picture for two hundred dollars! Think of it — and I wormed it out of him that that fixed his high-water mark. He was

going to buy an abandoned farm up in Connecticut somewhere; two hundred dollars down on a thousand dollars of New England landscape; said he hoped to paint enough pictures up there this summer to make it possible to keep a horse! There's an idea for you; being rich enough to keep a horse, just when the zoölogical museums are hustling to get specimens of the species before the last one dies! You could do something funny, awfully funny on that — eminent zoölogist out looking for a stuffed horse to stand up beside the ichthyosaurus and the diplodocus."

The Poet expressed his gratitude for the suggestion good-naturedly. He was studying the man before him in the hope of determining just how far he had retrograded, if indeed there had been retrogression. Redfield was a trifle stouter than he had been in the days of their intimacy, and spoke with a confidence and assurance that the Redfield of old days

had lacked. The interview had come about much easier than he had hoped, and Redfield's warmth was making it easier. He was relieved to find on this closer inspection that Redfield had not changed greatly. Once or twice the broker's brown eyes dimmed with a dreaminess that his visitor remembered. He was still a handsome fellow, not over thirty-five the Poet reckoned, and showing no traces of hard living. The coarse, unruly brown hair had not shared the general smoothing-out that was manifest in the man's apparel. It was a fine head, set strongly on broad shoulders. The Poet, always minutely observant in such matters, noted the hands — slim, long, supple, that had once been deft with brush and graver. In spite of the changes of seven years, concretely expressed in the "Investment Securities" on the outer door, the Poet concluded that much remained of the Miles Redfield he had known. And this being true increased his

difficulties in reconciling his friend with the haunting picture of Marjorie as she had stood plaintively aloof at the children's party, or with the young wife whose cheery, hopeful letter he had read in the early hours of the morning.

"I passed your old house this afternoon," the Poet observed casually. "I was out getting a breath of country air and came in through Marston. You were a pioneer when you went there and it's surprising how that region has developed. I had a hard time finding the cottage, and should n't have known it if it had n't been for some of the ineffaceable marks. The shack you built for a studio, chiefly with your own hands, seems to have been turned into a garage by the last tenant — Oh, profanest usurpation! But the house has n't been occupied for some time. That patch of shrubbery you set out against the studio has become a flourishing jungle. Let me see, — I seem to recall that I once did a pretty good sonnet in the

studio, to the gentle whizz of the lawn-mower you were manipulating outside."

"I remember that afternoon perfectly — and the sonnet, which is one of your best. I dare say a bronze tablet will be planted there in due course of time to mark a favorite haunt of the mighty bard."

Redfield had found the note of reminiscence ungrateful, and he was endeavoring to keep the talk in a light key. He very much hoped that the Poet would make one of his characteristic tangential excursions into the realms of impersonal anecdote. It was rather remarkable that this man of all men had happened in just now, fresh from an inspection of the bungalow and the studio behind the lilacs that Elizabeth had planted. He began to feel uncomfortable. It was not so much the presence of the small, compact, dignified gentleman in the chair by the window that disturbed him as the aims, standards, teachings that were so inseparably

associated with his visitor's name. Redfield's perplexity yielded suddenly to annoyance, and he remarked shortly, as though anticipating questions that were presumably in his friend's mind: —

"Elizabeth and I have quit; you've probably heard that." And then, as though to dispose of the matter quickly, he added: "It would n't work — too much incompatibility; I'm willing to take the blame — guess I'll have to, anyhow!" he ended grimly. "I suppose it's rather a shock to a friend like you, who knew us at the beginning, when we were planting a garden to live in forever, to find that seven years wound it up. I confess that I was rather knocked out myself to find that I had lost my joy in trimming the hedge and sticking bulbs in the ground."

"I noticed," said the Poet musingly, "that the weeds are rioting deliriously in the garden."

"Weeds!" Redfield caught him up harshly;

"I dare say there are weeds! Our trouble was that we thought too much about the crocuses, and forgot to put in cabbages!"

"Well, you're putting them in now!"

"Oh, don't be hard on me! I'll let most people jump on me and never talk back, but you with your fine perceptions ought to understand. Life is n't what it used to be; the pace is quicker, changes come faster, and if a man and woman find that they've made a mistake, it's better to cut it all out than to live under the same roof and scowl at each other across the table. I guess you can't duck that!"

"I shan't try to duck it," replied the Poet calmly. "There's never anything gained by evading a clean-cut issue. It's you who are dodging. Remember," he said, with a smile, "that I should n't have broached the subject myself; but now that you've brought it up —"

He paused, in his habitual deliberate fashion, reflecting with grateful satisfaction upon the

care with which he had hidden his tracks! He was now in Redfield's office; and his old friend had instructed the clerks outside that he was not to be disturbed so long as this distinguished citizen chose to honor him. The Poet, for the first time in his life, took advantage of his reputation. Redfield, on his side, knew that it was impossible to evict the best-loved man in the Commonwealth, whose presence in his office had doubtless sent a thrill to the very core of the skyscraper.

"Of course, these things really concern only the parties immediately interested," Redfield remarked, disturbed by his caller's manner and anxious to hide behind generalizations. He swung himself round in his chair, hoping that this utterance would deflect the discussion into more comfortable channels; but the Poet waited patiently for Redfield to face him again.

"That is perfectly true," he admitted; "and

I should certainly resent the interference of outsiders if I were in your plight."

Redfield was nodding his assent, feeling that here, after all, was a reasonable being, who would go far to avoid an unwelcome intrusion upon another's affairs. He was still nodding complacently when the Poet remarked, with a neatness of delivery that he usually reserved for humorous effects, —

"But it happens, Miles, that I *am* an interested party!"

The shock of this surprise shook Redfield's composure. He glanced quickly at his caller and then at the door.

"You mean that Elizabeth has sent you!" he gasped. "If that's the case —"

"No; I have n't seen Elizabeth for some time — not since I heard of your troubles; and I'm not here to represent her — at least, not in the way you mean."

Redfield's face expressed relief; he had been

about to refer his visitor to his lawyer, but he was still pretty much at sea.

"I represent not one person, but several millions of people," the Poet proceeded to explain himself unsmilingly, in a tone that Redfield did not remember. "You see, Miles, your difficulties and your attitude toward your family and life in general are hurting my business; this may sound strange, but it's quite true. And it's of importance to me and to my clients, so to speak."

Redfield stared at him frowningly.

"What on earth are you driving at?" he blurted, still hoping that this parley was only the introduction to a joke of some sort. There was, however, nothing in the Poet's manner to sustain this hope — nor could he detect any trace of the furtive smile which, he recalled, sometimes gave warning of the launching of some absurdity by this man who so easily played upon laughter and tears.

"There's no such thing as you and me in this world, Redfield," pursued the Poet — and his smile reappeared now, fleetingly, and he was wholly at ease, confident, direct, business-like. "We're all Us — you might say that mankind is a lot of Us-es. And when you let the weeds grow up in your garden they're a menace to all the neighbors. And you can't just go off and leave them; it is n't fair or square. I see you don't yet quite understand where I come in — how you're embarrassing me, cheating me, hurting my business, to put it flatly. You're making it appear that I'm a false prophet, a teacher of an outworn creed. Any reputation that you're willing to concede I have does n't rest upon profound scholarship, which I don't pretend to possess, but upon the feeble testimony I've borne to some very old ideals. You've known me a long time and you can't say that I've ever bragged of myself — and if you knew how humbly I've taken such

success as I've had you'd know that I'm not likely to be misled by the public's generous kindness toward my work. But I owe something to the rest of Us; I can't afford to stand by and see the little fringes I've tacked on to old fabrics torn off without making a protest. To put it another way, I'm not going to have it said that the gulf is so widening between poetry and life that another generation will be asking what our rhymed patter was all about — not without a protest. I hope you see what I'm driving at, and where I'm coming out —"

Redfield walked to the window and stared across the roofs, with his hands thrust into his pockets.

"It is n't easy, you know, Miles, for me to be doing this: I should n't be doing it if your affairs had n't been thrown in my face; if I did n't feel that they were very much my business. Yesterday I saw Marjorie — it was at a children's party at Mrs. Waring's — and the

sight of her was like a stab. I believe I wrote some verses for her second — maybe it was her third — birthday — pinned one of my little pink ribbons on her, so to speak, and made her one of my children. I tell you it hurt me to see her yesterday — and know that the weeds had sprung up in *her* garden!"

Redfield flung round impatiently.

"But you're applying the wrong tests; — you don't know all the circumstances! You would n't have a child brought up in a home of strife, would you? I'm willing for Elizabeth to have full charge of Marjorie — I've waived all my right to her. I'm not as callous as you think: I'd have you know that it's a wrench to part with her."

"You have n't any right to part with her," said the Poet. "You can't turn her over to Elizabeth as though she were a piece of furniture that you don't particularly care for! It is n't fair to the child; it's not fair to Eliza-

beth. Don't try to imagine that there's anything generous or magnanimous in waiving your claims to your own child. A man can't throw off his responsibilities as easily as that. It's contemptible; it won't do!"

"I tell you," said Redfield angrily, "the whole thing had grown intolerable. It did n't begin yesterday; it dates back three years ago, and —"

"Just how did it begin?" the Poet interrupted.

"Well, it began with money — not debts, strange to say, but the other way around! My father died and left me about eight thousand dollars — more than I ever hoped to hold in my hand at once if I lived forever. It looked bigger than a million, I can tell you. I was a bank-teller, earning fifteen hundred dollars a year and playing at art on the side. We lived on the edge of nowhere and pinched along with no prospect of getting anywhere. When that

money fell in my lap I saw the way out — it was like a dream come true, straight down from heaven. I'd picked up a good deal about the bond business in the bank — used to take a turn in that department occasionally; and it was n't like tackling something new. So I quit my bank job and jumped in for myself. After the third month I made expenses, and the second year I cleaned up five thousand dollars — and I'm not through yet," he concluded with a note of triumph.

"And how does all that affect Elizabeth?" asked the Poet quietly.

"Well, Elizabeth is one of those timid creatures, who'd be content to sit on a suburban veranda all her days and wait for the milk wagon. She could n't realize that opportunity was knocking at the door. How do you think she wanted to invest that eight thousand — wanted me to go to New York to study in the League; figured out that we could do that and

then go to Paris for a year. And if she had n't got to crying about it, I might have been fool enough to do it!"

He took a turn across the room and then paused before his caller with the air of one about to close a debate. The Poet was scrutinizing the handle of his umbrella fixedly, as though the rough wood presented a far more important problem than the matter under discussion.

"Elizabeth rather showed her faith in you there, did n't she?" he asked, without looking up. "Eight thousand dollars had come into the family, quite unexpectedly, and she was willing to invest it in *you*, in a talent she highly valued; in what had been to her the fine thing in you — the quality that had drawn you together. There was a chance that it might all have been wasted — that you would n't, as the saying is, have made good, and that at the end of a couple of years you would not only

have been out the money, but out of a job. She was willing to take the chance. The fact that you ignored her wishes and are prospering in spite of her is n't really the answer; a man who has shaken his wife and child — who has permitted them to be made the subjects of disagreeable gossip through his obstinate unreasonableness is n't prospering. In fact, I 'd call him a busted community."

"Oh, there were other things!" exclaimed Redfield. "We made each other uncomfortable; it got to a point where every trifling thing had to be argued — constant contention and wrangle. When I started into this business I had to move into town. After I 'd got the nicest flat I could hope to pay for that first year, Elizabeth insisted on being unhappy about *that.* It was important for me to cultivate people who would be of use to me; it 's a part of this game; but she did n't like my new acquaintances — made it as hard for me as

possible. She always had a way of carrying her chin a little high, you know. These people that have always lived in this town are the worst lot of snobs that ever breathed free air, and just because her great-grandfather happened to land here in time to say good-bye to the last Indian is no reason for snubbing the unfortunates who only arrived last summer. If her people had n't shown the deterioration you find in all old stock, and if her father had n't died broke, you might excuse her; but this thing of living on your ancestors is no good — it's about as thin as starving your stomach on art and feeding your soul on sunsets. I tell you, my good brother," — with an ironic grin on his face he clapped his hand familiarly on the Poet's shoulder, — "there are more things in real life than are dreamed of in your poet's philosophy!"

The Poet particularly disliked this sort of familiarity; his best friends never laid hands

EVERY TRIFLING THING HAD TO BE ARGUED

on him. He resented even more the leer that had written itself in Redfield's face. Traces of a coarsening of fiber that he had looked for at the beginning of the interview were here apparent in tone and gesture, and did not contribute to the Poet's peace of mind. The displeasure in his face seemed to remind Redfield that this was not a man one slapped on the back, or spoke to leeringly. He flushed and muttered an apology, which the Poet chose to ignore.

"A woman who has had half an acre of Mother Earth to play in for seven years and has fashioned it into an expression of her own soul, and has swung her baby in a hammock under cherry trees in bloom, must be pardoned if she doesn't like being cooped up in a flat and asked to be polite to people her husband expects to make money out of. I understand that you have left the flat for a room at the club."

"I mean to take care of them — you must give me credit for that!" said Redfield, angry that he was not managing his case more effectively. "But Elizabeth is riding the high horse and refuses to accept anything from me!"

"I should think she would! She would n't be the woman I've admired all these years if she'd let you throw crumbs to her from your club window!"

"She thinks she's going to rub it into me by going to work! She's going to teach a kindergarten, in the hope, I suppose, of humiliating me!"

"It would be too bad if some of the humiliation landed on your door!"

"I've been as decent as I could; I've done everything I could to protect her."

"I suppose," observed the Poet carelessly, "there's another woman somewhere —"

"That's a lie!" Redfield flared. "I've always been square with Elizabeth, and you

know it! If there's any scandalous gossip of that kind afloat it's damnably unjust! I hoped you had a better idea of me than that!"

"I'm sorry," said the Poet, with sincere contrition. "We'll consider, then, that there's no such bar to a reconciliation."

He let his last word fall quietly as though it were a pebble he had dropped into a pool for the pleasure of watching the resulting ripples.

"If that's what's in your mind, the sooner you get it out the better!" snapped Redfield. "We've gone beyond all that!"

"The spring was unusually fine," the Poet hastened to remark with cheerful irrelevance, as though all that had gone before had merely led up to the weather; "June is justifying Lowell's admiration. Your view off there is splendid. It just occurs to me that these tall buildings are not bad approximations of ivory towers; a good place for dreams — nice hori-

zons — edges of green away off there, and unless my sight is failing that's a glimpse of the river you get beyond those heaven-kissing chimneys."

Redfield mopped his brow and sighed his relief. Clearly the Poet, realizing the futility of the discussion, was glad to close it; and Redfield had no intention of allowing him to return to it.

He opened the door with an eagerness at which the Poet smiled as he walked deliberately through the outer room, exposing himself once more to the admiring smiles of the girls at the typewriters. He paused and told them a story, to which Redfield, from the threshold of his sanctum, listened perforce.

At the street entrance the Poet met Fulton hurrying into the building.

"I was just thinking of you!" cried the young man. "Half a minute ago I dropped a little packet with your name on it into the box at

the corner, and was feeling like a criminal to think of what I was inflicting!"

"It occurs to me," mused the Poet, leaning on his umbrella, quite indifferent to the hurrying crowd that swept through the entrance, "that the mail-box might be a good subject for a cheerful jingle — the repository of hopes, ambitions, abuse, threats, love letters, and duns. It's by treating such subjects attractively that we may hope to reach the tired business man and persuade him that not weak-winged is song! Apollo leaning against a letter-box and twanging his lyre divine for the muses to dance a light fantastic round — a very pretty thought, Mr. Fulton!"

The Poet, obviously on excellent terms with the world, indulged himself further in whimsical comment on possible subjects for verse, even improvising a few lines of doggerel for the reporter's amusement.

And then, after he had turned away, he

called the young man back, as though by an afterthought.

"As to Redfield, you have n't done anything yet?"

"No; I'm on my way to see him now."

"Well, don't be in a hurry about making the change. You'd better go up to the lake Sunday and sit on the shore all day and let June soak in. You will find that it helps. I'll meet those verses you're sending me at the outer wicket; I'm sure I'll like them!"

IV

When Saturday proved to be the fairest of June days, the Poet decided that it was a pity to remain in city pent when three hours on the train would carry him to Waupegan, a spot whose charms had been brought freshly to his attention by the sheaf of verses Fulton had sent him. He had hoped to find Fulton on the train; but when the young man did not appear,

he found compensation in the presence of Mrs. Waring, who was bound for Waupegan to take possession of her house.

"Marian took Marjorie up yesterday. It occurred to me, after I'd posted Elizabeth off with a servant to straighten up my house, that I'd done the cruelest thing imaginable, for Elizabeth went honeymooning to Waupegan — I gave her and Miles my house for a fortnight, as you may remember. I wanted to get her out of town and I never thought of that until she'd gone."

"Is n't it a good sign that Elizabeth would go? It shows that the associations of the lake still mean something to her."

"Oh, but they don't mean anything to him — that 's the trouble! If there ever was a brute — "

"There are worse men — or brutes," the Poet mildly suggested.

"I can't imagine it!" Mrs. Waring replied tartly.

"I'm going fishing," the Poet explained, when Mrs. Waring demanded to know what errand was carrying him lakeward. His dislike of railway journeys was well known to all his friends; and no one had ever heard of his going fishing.

"I have asked you to the lake scores of times to visit me, and you have scorned all my invitations. Now that I've caught you in the act of going up alone, I demand that you make me the visit you've been promising for twenty years."

"Fishing," observed the Poet soberly, "is a business that requires the closest attention and strictest privacy. I should be delighted to make that visit at this time, but when I fish I'm an intolerable person — unsociable and churlish; you'd always hate me if I accepted your hospitable shelter when I would a-fishing go."

"You'll not find the hotel a particularly

tranquil place for literary labor, and the food at my house could n't be worse than you 'll get there. I've warned you!"

She was frankly curious as to the nature of his errand, and continued to chaff him about his piscatorial ambitions. He gave his humor full rein in adding to her mystification.

"Perhaps," he finally confessed, "I shall hire a boy to do the fishing for me, while I sit under a tree and boss him."

"No boy with any spirit would fish for anybody else — no respectable, well-brought-up boy would!"

"There's where you're quite mistaken! I expect to find a boy — and a pretty likely young fellow he is, reared on a farm, and all that — I expect to find him ready for business in the morning. Mind you, he did n't promise to come, but if he's the youngster I think he is, he 'll be there right side up with care to-morrow morning."

"I don't believe I like you so well when you play at being mysterious. This idea, that if you serenely fold your hands and wait — John Burroughs, is n't it? — your own will come to you, never worked for me. I should never have got anywhere in my life if I had folded my hands and waited."

"There must always be one who journeys to meet him who waits, and with your superb energy you have done the traveling. I'm playing both parts in this affair just as an experiment. To-day I travel; to-morrow I shall sit on the dock and wait for that boy who's to do my fishing for me. I'm not prepared for disappointment; I have every confidence that he will arrive in due season. Particularly now that you tell me Marian is already illuminating the landscape!"

Mrs. Waring was giving him only half attention, but she pricked up her ears at this statement.

"Marian! What on earth has she to do with this fishing-trip?"

"Nothing, except that I have a message for her from the cool slopes of Parnassus. It's almost like something you read of in books — her being here waiting for the sacred papyri."

He tapped his pocket and smiled.

"I had n't the slightest idea she was up there waiting," he continued. "You must confess that it's rather remarkable! Folding her hands, utterly unconscious of what Fate has in store for her; and poems being written to her, and my fisher-boy on the trail looking for me — and her!"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're driving at, but you'd better keep your verses for somebody else. Marian's a much more practical girl than Elizabeth; I don't quite see her receiving messages from the Muses with more than chilly politeness. You may be sure she will profit by Elizabeth's experience. Elizabeth married a

man with an artistic temperament and she's paid dearly for it. A blow like that falling so close to Marian is bound to have its effect. If you want to win her smiles, don't appeal to her through poetry. As I was saying the other day, poetry is charming, and sometimes it's uplifting; but we're getting away from it. These are changing times, and pretty soon it won't be respectable to be decent!"

"You said something to the same effect the other day when your garden was full of children. I was greatly disappointed in you; it was n't fair to the children to talk that way — even if they did n't hear you. I was all broken up after that party; I have n't been the same man since!"

"Oh, I did n't mean to reflect on you or your work; you know that!"

"I know nothing of the kind," returned the Poet amiably. "You have said it twice, though the first time was enough. I'm a differ-

ent person; you 've changed the whole current of my life! I'm making a journey, on a very hot afternoon, that I should never have thought of making if it had n't been for your cynical remarks. I've taken employment as an agent of Providence, just to prove to you that my little preachments in rhyme are not altogether what our young people call piffle. I've come down out of the pulpit, so to speak, to put my sermons into effect — a pretty good thing for all parsons to do. Or, to go back to the starting-point, I've hung my harp on the willows that I may fish the more conveniently."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself to make sport of a woman of my years! You had better tell me a funny story," said Mrs. Waring, fearing that he was laughing at her.

"I shall do nothing of the kind! I am heavily armed with magazines and I shall read the rest of the way to Waupegan. Besides, I need

time for planning my work to-morrow. It will be my busiest day!"

. . . . . .

It was dark when the train paused at the lake station, and Mrs. Redfield was waiting, having come over in a launch to meet Mrs. Waring. She was wrapped in a long coat and carried a lantern, which she held up laughingly to verify her identification of the Poet.

"Marian and I have just been talking of you! She and Marjorie have told me all about the garden-party, and of the beautiful time you gave the children."

"If she did n't mention the beautiful time they gave me, she did n't tell the whole story. And if I had n't gone to Mrs. Waring's party, I should n't be here!"

"Don't pay any attention to him," interposed Mrs. Waring, counting her trunks as they were transferred to the miniature steamer

that plied the lake. "There's some joke about his coming here; he's told you one story and an hour ago he was assuring me that he had come up to fish!"

She turned away for a moment to speak to some old friends among the cottagers, leaving Mrs. Redfield and the Poet alone.

"I'm glad you are here," said the Poet, "for I shall stay a few days and I hope we can have some talks."

"I hope so; but I must go very soon. I've only been waiting for Mrs. Waring to come. It was like her to make a chance for me to get away; you know Waupegan is like home; my father used to have a cottage here and we children were brought up on the lake."

She was a small, dark-eyed woman, a marked contrast to her tall, fair sister. Her sense of fun had always been a delight to her friends; she was a capital mimic and had been a star in amateur theatricals. The troubles of the past

year — or of the years, to accept Redfield's complaint at its full value — had not destroyed her vivacity. She was of that happy company who carry into middle life and beyond the freshness of youth. She had been married at twenty, and to the Poet's eyes she seemed little older now.

He had been wondering since his interview with Redfield how he had ever dared go as far in meddling with other people's affairs. Face to face with Redfield's wife, he was more self-conscious than was comfortable. It would not be easy to talk to Elizabeth of her difficulties, for the Poet was not a man whom women took into their confidence over a teacup. He abused himself for leaving his proper orbit for foolish adventures in obscure, unmapped corners of the heavens.

He said that the stars were fine, and having failed to amplify this with anything like the grace that might be expected of a poet, he

glanced at her and found her eyes bright with tears. This was altogether disconcerting, but it illustrated the embarrassments of the situation into which he had projected himself. Clearly the ambition to harmonize poetry and life was not without peril; he felt that as the ambassador from the court of Poesy it might be necessary to learn a new language to make himself understood at the portals of Life. Instead of promoting peace, he might, by the least tactless remark, prolong the war, and the thought was dismaying.

As she turned her head to hide treasonable tears he saw her draw herself up, and lift her head as though to prove to him that there was still courage in her heart, no matter if her eyes did betray the citadel.

"You see, we hung up a new moon in honor of your coming. It's like a little feather, just as Rossetti says."

"Too suggestive of a feather duster," he re-

marked lightly; and seeing Mrs. Waring walking toward them he added, gravely: —

"I've lied like the most miserable of sinners about this trip; I came in answer to your letter. I find that most letters will answer themselves if you wait long enough. Yours is just seven years old!"

"Oh," she cried, with a quick catch of the breath; "you don't mean that you kept *that!*"

"I most certainly did! It was a very beautiful letter. I happened to be re-reading it the other night and decided that it deserved an answer; so here I am!"

"I'm both sorry and glad you came. It's immensely good of you; it's just like you! But it's no use; of course you know that!"

"Oh, I should never have come on my own hook! I'm only the humble representative of thousands and thousands of people, and the stars — maybe — and that frugal slice of

melon up there we call the moon. Nobody else wanted the job, so I took it."

He laughed at the puzzled look in the dark eyes, which was like the wondering gaze of a child, half-fearful, half-confiding.

"Elizabeth, are you going to stand there all night talking to any poet that comes along!" demanded Mrs. Waring; and as she joined them the Poet began talking amusingly to allay suspicion.

He again declined to accompany her home, protesting that he must not disappoint the boy who would certainly be on hand in the morning to fish for him. He waved his hand as the launch swung off, called the man who was guarding his suit-case and followed him to the inn.

PART
TWO

PART TWO

V

MARIAN and Marjorie had builded a house of sand on a strip of shaded beach, and by the fraudulent use of sticks and stones they had made it stand in violation of all physical laws. Now that the finishing touches had been given to the tower, Marjorie thrust her doll through a window.

"That will never do!" protested Marian. "In a noble château like this the châtelaine must not stand on her head. When the knights

come riding, she must be waiting, haughty and proud, in the great hall to meet them."

"Should ums?" asked Marjorie, watching her aunt gouge a new window in the moist wall so that the immured lady might view the lake more comfortably.

"'Ums should,' indeed!"

"Should the lady have coffee-cake for ums tea? We never made no pantry nor kitchen in ums house, and lady will be awful hungry. I'll push ums a cracker. There, you lady, you can eat ums supper!"

"When her knight comes riding, he will bring a deer or maybe a big black boar and there will be feasting in the great hall this night," said Marian.

"Maybe," suggested Marjorie, lying flat and peering into the château, "he will kill the grand lady with ums sword; and it will be all over bluggy."

"Horrible!" cried Marian, closing her eyes

and shuddering. "Let us hope he will be a parfait, gentil knight who will be nice to the lady and tell her beautiful stories of the warriors bold he has killed for love of her."

"My boy doll got all smashed," said Marjorie; "and ums can't come a-widing."

"A truly good knight who got smashed would arrive on his shield just the same; he would n't let anything keep him from coming back to his lady."

"If ums got all killed dead, would ums come back?"

"He would; he most certainly would!" declared Marian convincingly. "And there would be a beautiful funeral, probably at night, and the other knights would march to the grave bearing torches. And they would repeat a vow to avenge his death and the slughorn would sound and off they'd go."

"And ums lady would be lonesome some more," sighed Marjorie.

"Oh, that's nothing! Ladies have to get used to being lonesome when knights go riding. They must sit at home and knit or make beautiful tapestries to show the knights when they come home."

"Marjorie not like to be lonesome. What if Dolly est sit in the shotum —"

"Château is more elegant; though 'shotum' is flavorsome and colorful. Come to think of it 'shotum' is just as good. Dolly must sit and keep sitting. She could n't go out to look for her knight without committing a grave social error."

These matters having been disposed of, Marjorie thought a stable should be built for the knights' horses, and they began scooping sand to that end. Marian's eyes rested dreamily upon distant prospects. The cool airs of early morning were still stirring, and here and there a white sail floated lazily on the blue water. The sandy beach lay only a short dis-

tance from Mrs. Waring's house, whose red roof was visible through a cincture of maples on the bluff above.

"If knights comes widing to our shotum and holler for ums shootolain, would you holler to come in?" asked Marjorie, from the stable wall.

"It would be highly improper for a châtelaine to 'holler'; but if I were there, I should order the drawbridge to be lowered, and I should bid my knight lift the lid of the coal-bucket thing they always wear on their heads, — you know how they look in the picture books, — and then ask him what tidings he brought. You always ask for tidings."

"Does ums? Me would ask ums for candy, and new hats with long fithery feathers; and ums —"

"Hail, ladies of the Lake! May a lone harper descend and graciously vouchsafe a song?"

From the top of the willow-lined bluff behind them came a voice with startling abruptness. In their discussion of the proprieties of château life they had forgotten the rest of the world, and it was disconcerting thus to be greeted from the unknown.

"Is it ums knight come walking?" whispered Marjorie, glancing round guardedly.

Marian jumped up and surveyed the overhanging willow screen intently. She discerned through the shrubbery a figure in gray, supported by a tightly sheathed umbrella. A narrow-brimmed straw hat and a pair of twinkling eye-glasses attached to the most familiar countenance in the Commonwealth now contributed to a partial portrait of the lone harper. Marian, having heard from her sister and Mrs. Waring of the Poet's advent, was able to view this apparition without surprise.

"Come down, O harper, and gladden us with song!" she called.

"I have far to go ere the day end; but I bring writings for one whom men call fair."

He tossed a long envelope toward them; the breeze caught and held it, then dropped it close to the château. Marjorie ran to pick it up.

"Miss Agnew," said the Poet, lifting his hat, "a young gentleman will pass this way shortly; I believe him to be a person of merit. He will come overseas from a far country, and answer promptly to the name of Frederick. Consider that you have been properly introduced by the contents of yonder packet and bid him welcome in my name."

"Ums a cwazy man," Marjorie announced in disgust. "Ums the man what told a funny story at Auntie Waring's party and then runned off."

The quivering of the willows already marked the Poet's passing. He had crossed the lake to the Waring cottage, Marian surmised, and was now returning thither.

Marjorie, uninterested in letters, which, she had observed, frequently made people cry, attacked with renewed zeal the problem of housing the knights' horses, while Marian opened the long envelope and drew out half a dozen blue onion-skin letter-sheets and settled herself to read. She read first with pleasurable surprise and then with bewilderment. Poetry, she had heard somewhere, should be read out of doors, and clearly these verses were of that order; and quite as unmistakably this, of all the nooks and corners in the world, was the proper spot in which to make the acquaintance of these particular verses. Indeed, it seemed possible, by a lifting of the eyes, to verify the impressions they recorded, — the blue arch, the gnarled boughs of the beeches, the overhanging sycamores, the distant daisy-starred pastures running down to meet the clear water. Such items as these were readily intelligible; but she found dancing through

all the verses a figure that under various endearing names was the *dea ex machina* of every scene; and this seemed irreconcilable with the backgrounds afforded by the immediate landscape. Pomona had, it appeared, at some time inspected the apple harvest in this neighborhood: —

> The dew flashed from her sandals gold
> As down the orchard aisles she sped; —

or this same delightful divinity became Diana, her arrows cast aside, smashing a tennis ball, or once again paddling a canoe through wind-ruffled water into the flames of a dying September sun. Or, the bright doors of dawn swinging wide, down the steps tripped this same incredible young person taunting the waiting hours for their delay. Was it possible that her own early morning dives from Mrs. Waring's dock could have suggested this!

Marian read hurriedly; then settled herself for the more deliberate perusal that these picto-

rial stanzas demanded. It was with a feeling of unreality that she envisaged every point the slight, graceful verses described. Where was there another orchard that stole down to a lake's edge; or where could Atalanta ever have indulged herself at tennis to the applause of rapping woodpeckers if not in the court by the casino on the other side of the lake? The Poet — that is, the Poet All the People Loved — was not greatly given to the invoking of gods and goddesses; and this was not his stroke — unless he were playing some practical joke, which, to be sure, was quite possible. But she felt herself in contact with some one very different from *the* Poet; with quite another poet who sped Pomona down orchard aisles catching at the weighted boughs for the joy of hearing the thump of falling apples, and turning with a laugh to glance at the shower of ruddy fruit. A lively young person, this Pomona; a spirited and agile being, half-real, half-mythical. A

series of quatrains, under the caption "In September," described the many-named goddess as the unknown poet had observed her in her canoe at night: —

I watched afar her steady blade
Flash in the path the moon had made,
  And saw the stars on silvery ripples
Shine clear and dance and faint and fade.

Then through the windless night I heard
Her song float toward me, dim and blurred;
  'T was like a call to vanished summers
From a lost, summer-seeking bird.

There were many canoes on Waupegan; without turning her head she counted a dozen flashing paddles. And there were many girls who played capital tennis, or who were quite capable of sprinting gracefully down the aisles of fruitful orchards. She had remained at the lake late the previous year, and had perhaps shaken apple boughs when in flight through orchards; and she had played tennis diligently and had paddled her canoe on many September

nights through the moon's path and over quivering submerged stars; and yet it was inconceivable that her performances had attracted the attention of any one capable of transferring them to rhyme. It would be pleasant, though, to be the subject of verses like these! Once, during her college days, she had moved a young gentleman to song, but the amatory verses she had evoked from his lyre had been pitiful stuff that had offended her critical sense. These blue sheets bore a very different message — delicate and fanciful, with a nice restraint under their buoyancy.

While the Poet had said that the author of the verses would arrive shortly, she had taken this as an expression of the make-believe in which he constantly indulged in his writings; but one of the canoes she had been idly observing now bore unmistakably toward the cove.

Marjorie called for assistance and Marian

thrust the blue sheets into her belt and busied herself with perplexing architectural problems. Marjorie's attention was distracted a moment later by the approaching canoe.

"Aunt Marian!" she chirruped, pointing with a sand-encrusted finger, "more foolish mans coming with glad tidings. Ums should come by horses, not by ums canoe."

"We must n't be too particular how ums come, Marjorie," replied Marian glancing up with feigned carelessness. "It's the knights' privilege to come as they will. Many a maiden sits waiting just as we are and no knight ever comes."

"When ums comes they might knock down our house — maybe?" She tacked on the query with so quaint a turn that Marian laughed.

"We must n't grow realistic! We must pretend it's play, and keep pretending that they will be kind and considerate gentlemen."

Her own efforts to pretend that they were

building a stable for the steeds of Arthur's knights did not conceal her curiosity as to a young man who had driven his craft very close inshore, and now, after a moment's scrutiny of the cove, chose a spot for landing and sent the canoe with a whish up the sandy beach half out of the water.

He jumped out and begged their pardon as Marjorie planted herself defensively before the castle.

"Ums can go 'way! Ums did n't come widing on ums horse like my story book."

"I apologize! Not being Neptune I could n't ride my horse through the water. And besides I 'm merely obeying orders. I was told to appear here at ten o'clock, sharp, by a gentleman I paddled over from the village and left on Mrs. Waring's dock an hour ago. He gave me every assurance that I should be received hospitably, but if I 'm intruding I shall proceed farther upon the wine-dark sea."

THE APPROACHING CANOE

"Is ums name Fwedwick?" asked Marjorie.

Fulton controlled with difficulty an impulse to laugh at the child's curious twist of his name, but admitted gravely that such, indeed, was the case.

"Then ums can stay," said Marjorie in a tone of resignation, and returned to her building.

Marian, who, during his colloquy with Marjorie, had risen and was brushing the sand from her skirt, now spoke for the first time.

"It's hardly possible you're looking for me — I'm Miss Agnew."

He bowed profoundly.

"A distinguished man of letters assured me that I should find him here," the young man explained as he drew on a blue serge coat he had thrown out of the canoe; "but unless he is hiding in the bushes he has played me false. Such being the case I can't do less than offer to withdraw if my presence is annoying."

The faint mockery of these sentences was relieved by the mischievous twinkle in his eyes. They were very dark eyes, and his hair was intensely black and brushed back from his forehead smoothly. His face was dark even to swarthiness and his cheek bones were high and a trifle prominent.

He was dressed for the open: white ducks, canvas shoes, and a flannel shirt with soft collar and a scarlet tie.

In spite of his offer to withdraw if his presence proved ungrateful to the established tenants of the cove, it occurred to Marian that he was not, apparently, expecting to be rebuffed. Marjorie, satisfied that the stranger in no way menaced her peace, was addressing herself with new energy to the refashioning of the stable walls along lines recommended by Marian.

"The ways of the Poet are inscrutable," observed Fulton; "he told me your name and

spoke in the highest terms of your kindness of heart and tolerance of stupidity."

"He was more sparing of facts in warning me of your approach. He said your name would be Frederick, as though the birds would supply the rest of it."

"Very likely that's the way of the illustrious — to assume that we are all as famous as themselves; highly flattering, but calculated to deceive. As the birds don't know me, I will say that my surname is Fulton. A poor and an ill-favored thing, but mine own."

"It quite suffices," replied Marian in his own key. "We have built a château," she explained, "and the châtelaine is even now gazing sadly upon the waters hoping that her true knight will appear. We have mixed metaphor and history most unforgivably — a French château, set here on an American lake in readiness for the Knights of the Round Table."

"We must n't quibble over details in such

matters; it's the spirit of the thing that counts. I can see that Marjorie isn't troubled by anachronisms."

The blue sheets containing, presumably, this young man's verses, were still in her belt, and their presence there did not add to her comfort. Of course he might not be the real author of those tributes to the lake's divinities. His appearance did not strongly support the suspicion. The young man who had sent her flowers accompanied by verses on various occasions was an anæmic young person who would never have entrusted himself to so tricksy a bark as a canoe. Frederick Fulton was of a more heroic mould; she thought it quite likely that he could shoulder his canoe and march off with it if it pleased him to do so. He looked capable of doing many things besides scribbling verses. His manner, as she analyzed it, left nothing to be desired. While he was enjoying this encounter to the full, as his ready smile

assured her, he did not presume upon her tolerance, but seemed satisfied to let her prescribe the terms of their acquaintance. This was a lark of some kind, and whether he had connived at the meeting, or whether he was as much in the dark as she as to the Poet's purpose in bringing them together, remained a mystery.

She found a seat on a log near the engrossed Marjorie, and Fulton settled himself comfortably on the sand.

"This has been a day of strange meetings," he began. "I really had no intention of coming to Waupegan; and I was astonished to find our friend the Poet on the hotel veranda this morning. He had told me to come; — it was rather odd —"

"Oh, he told you to come!"

"In town, two days ago he suggested it. I wonder if he 's in the habit of doing that sort of thing."

"It would hardly be polite for me to criticize him now that he has introduced us. I fear we shall have to make the best of it!"

"Oh, I was n't thinking of it in that way!"

They regarded each other with searching inquiry and then laughed. Her possession of the verses had already advertised itself to him; she saw his eyes rest upon them carelessly for an instant and then he disregarded them; and this pleased her. If he were their author — if, possibly, he had written them of her — she approved of his good breeding in ignoring them.

"I know this part of the world better than almost any other," he went on, clasping his hands over his knees. "I was born only ten miles from here on a farm; and I fished here a lot when I was a boy."

"But, of course, you've escaped from the farm into the larger world or the Poet would n't know you."

"Well, you see, I'm a newspaper reporter

down at the capital and reporters know everybody."

"Oh, the Poet does n't know everybody; though everybody knows him. Perhaps we'd better pass that. Tell me some more about your early adventures on the lake."

"You have heard all that 's worth telling. We farm boys used to come over and fish before the city men filched all the bass and left only sunfish and suckers. Then I grew up and went to the State Agricultural School — to fit me for a literary career! — and I did n't get here again until last fall when my paper gave me a vacation and I spent a fortnight at the farm and used to ride over here on my bicycle every morning to watch the summer resorters and read books."

"It 's strange I never saw you," said Marian, "for I was here last fall. My own memories of the pioneers go back almost to the Indians. My father used to own that red-roofed cottage

you see across the lake; and I've tumbled into the water from every point in sight."

"September and June are the best months here, I think. It was all much nicer, though, before the place became so popular."

"Hardly a gracious remark, seeing that Marjorie and I are here, and all these cottagers are friends of ours!"

"I have n't the slightest objection to you and Marjorie. You fit into the landscape delightfully — give it tone and color; but I was thinking of the noisy people at the inns down by the village. They seem rather unnecessary. The Poet and I agreed about that this morning while we were looking for a quiet place for an after-breakfast smoke."

"It must be quite fine to know him — really know him," she said musingly.

"Yes; but before you grow too envious of my acquaintance I'll have to confess that I've known him less than a week."

"A great deal can happen in a week," she remarked absently.

"A great deal has!" he returned quickly.

This seemed to be rather leading; but a cry for help from Marjorie provided a diversion.

Fulton jumped up and ran to the perplexed builder's aid, neatly repaired a broken wall, and when he had received the child's grave thanks reseated himself at Marian's feet. The blue onion-skin paper had disappeared from her belt; he caught her in the act of crumpling the sheets into her sleeve.

With their disappearance she felt her courage returning. His confessions as to the farm, the university, the newspaper — created an outline which she meant to encourage him to fill in. Journalism, like war and the labors of those who go down to the sea in ships, suggests romance; and Marian had never known a reporter before.

"I should think it would be great fun work-

ing on a newspaper, and knowing things before they happen."

"And things that never happen!"

She was quick to seize upon this.

"The imagination must enter into all writing — even facts, history. Bryant was a newspaper man, and he wrote poetry, but I heard in school that he was a very good editor, too."

"I'm not an editor and nobody has called me a poet; but the suggestion pleases me," he said.

"If our own Poet offered you a leaf of his laurel, that would help establish your claims, — set you up in business, so to speak."

"I should hasten to return it before it withered! My little experiments in rhyme are not of the wreath-winning kind."

"Then you do write verses!"

"Yards!" he confessed shamelessly.

She was taken aback by this bold admission. His tone and manner implied that he set no

great store by his performances, and this piqued her. It seemed like a commentary on her critical judgment which had found them good. Fulton now became impersonal and philosophical.

"It's a great thing to have done what our Poet has done — give to the purely local a touch that makes it universal. That's what art does when it has heart behind it, and there 's the value of provincial literature. Hundreds of men had seen just what he saw, — the same variety of types and individuals against this Western landscape, — but it was left for him to set them forth with just the right stroke. And he has done other things, too, besides the *genre* studies that make him our own particular Burns; he has sung of days like this when hope rises high, and sung of them beautifully; and he has preached countless little sermons of cheer and contentment and aspiration. And he's the first poet who ever really understood

children — wrote not merely of them but to them. He's the poet of a thousand scrapbooks! I came up on a late train last night and got to talking to a stranger who told me he was on his way to visit his old home; pulled one of the Poet's songs of June out of his pocket and asked me to read it; said he'd cut it out of a newspaper that had come to him wrapped round a pair of shoes in some forsaken village in Texas, and that it had made him homesick for a sight of the farm where he was born. The old fellow grew tearful about it, and almost wrung a sob out of me. He was carrying that clipping pinned to his railway ticket — in a way it was his ticket home."

"Of course our Poet has the power to move people like that," murmured Marian. "It 's genius, a gift of the gods."

"He's been able to do it without ever cheapening himself; there's never any suggestion of that mawkishness we hear in vaudeville songs

that implore us to write home to mother to-night! He takes the simplest theme and makes literature of it."

Marian was thinking of her talk with the Poet at Mrs. Waring's garden-party. Strange to say, it seemed more difficult to express her disdain of romance and poetry to this young man than it had been to the Poet. And yet he evidently accepted unquestioningly the Poet's philosophy of life, which she had dismissed contemptuously, and in which, she assured herself, she did not believe to-day any more than she did a week ago. The incident of a pilgrim from Texas with a poem attached to his railway ticket had its touch of sentiment and pathos, but it did not weigh heavily against the testimony of experience which had proved in her own observation that life is perplexing and difficult, and that poetry and romance are only a lure and mesh to delude and betray the trustful.

"Poets have a good deal to fight against these days," she said, wishing to state her dissent as kindly as possible. "The Bible is full of poetry, but it has lost its hold on the people; it's like an outworn sun that no longer lights and warms the world. I wish it were n't so; but unfortunately we're all pretty helpless when it comes to the iron hoofs of the Time-Spirit."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, sitting erect, "we must n't make the mistake of thinking the Time-Spirit a new invention. We're lucky to live in the twentieth century when it goes on rubber heels; — when people are living poetry more and talking about it less. Why, the spirit of the Bible has just gone to work! I was writing an account of a new summer camp for children the day before I came up — one of those Sunday supplement pieces around a lot of pictures; and it occurred to me as I watched youngsters, who had never seen green grass

before, having the time of their lives, that such philanthropies did n't exist in the good old days when people dusted their Bibles oftener than they do now. There 's a difference between the Bible as a fetish and as a working plan for daily use. Preaching is n't left to the men who stand up in pulpits in black coats on Sundays; there 's preaching in all the magazines and newspapers all the time. For example, my paper raises money every summer to send children into the country; and then starts another fund to buy them Christmas presents. The apostles themselves did n't do much better than that!"

"Of course there are many agencies and a great deal of generosity," replied Marian colorlessly. The young men she knew were not in the habit of speaking of the Bible or of religion in this fashion. Religion had never made any strong appeal to her and she had dabbled in philanthropy fitfully without enthusiasm.

Fulton's direct speech made some response necessary and she tried to reply with an equally frank confidence.

"I suppose I'm a sort of heathen; I don't know what a pantheist is, but I think I must be one."

"Oh, you can be a pantheist without being a heathen! There's a natural religion that we all subscribe to, whether we're conscious of it or not. There's no use bothering about definitions or quarreling with anybody's church or creed. We're getting beyond that; it's the thing we make of ourselves that counts; and when it comes to the matter of worship, I suppose every one who looks up at a blue sky like that, and knows it to be good, is performing a sort of ritual and saying a prayer."

There was nothing in the breezy, exultant verses she had thrust into her sleeve to prepare her for such statements as these. While he spoke simply and half-smilingly, as though

to minimize the seriousness of his statements, his utterances had an undeniable ring of sincerity. He was provokingly at ease — this dark young gentleman who had been cast by the waters upon this tranquil beach. He was not at all like young men who called upon her and made themselves agreeable by talking of the theater or country club dances or the best places to spend vacations. She could not recall that any one had ever spoken to her before of man's aspirations in the terms employed by this newspaper reporter.

Marjorie, having prepared for the stabling of all the king's horses and all the king's men, announced her intention of contributing a wing to the château. This called for a conference in which they all participated. Then, when the addition had been planned in all soberness and the child had resumed her labors, Marian and Fred stared at the lake until the silence became oppressive. Marian spoke first,

tossing the ball of conversation into a new direction.

"You have confessed to yards of verses," she began, gathering up a handful of sand which she let slip through her fingers lingeringly, catching the grains in her palm. "I've seen — about a yard of them."

Clearly flirtation was not one of his accomplishments. His "Oh, I've scattered them round rather freely," ignored a chance to declare gracefully that she had been the inspiration of those lyrics, written in a perfectly legible hand on onion-skin letter-sheets, that were concealed in her sleeve. His indifference to the opening she had made for him piqued her. She was quite dashed by the calm tone in which he added, with no hint of sidling or simpering: —

"I've written reams of poems about you." (He might as well have said that he had scraped the ice off her sidewalk or carried coal into her cellar, for all the thrill she derived from his

admission.) "I hope you won't be displeased; but when I was ranging the lake last September we seemed to find the same haunts and to be interested in the same sort of thing, and it kept me busy dodging you, I can tell you! I exhausted the Classical Dictionary finding names for you; and it was n't any trouble at all to make verses about you. I was really astonished to find how necessary you were to the completion of my pen-and-ink sketches of all this," — a wave of the arm placed the lake shores in evidence, — "I liked you best in action; when the spirit moved you to run or drive your canoe over the water. You do all the outdoor things as though you had never done anything else; it 's a joy to watch you! I was sitting on a fence one day over there in Mrs. Waring's orchard and you ran by, — so near that I could hear the swish of your skirts, — and you made a high jump for a bough and shook down the apples and ran off laughing

like a boy afraid of being caught. I pulled out my notebook and scribbled seven stanzas on that little incident."

Any admiration that was conveyed by these frankly uttered sentences was of the most impersonal sort conceivable. She was not used to being treated in this fashion. Even his manner of asking her pardon for his temerariousness in apostrophizing her in his verses had lacked, in her critical appraisement of it, the humility a self-respecting young woman had a right to demand of a young poet who observes her without warrant, is pleased to admire her athletic prowess, her ways and her manners, and puts her into his verses as coolly as he might pick a flower from the wayside and wear it in his coat.

"Then you used me merely to give human interest to your poems; any girl running through Mrs. Waring's orchard and snatching at the apples would have done just as well?"

"Oh, I should n't say that," he replied, unabashed; "but even the poorest worm of a scribbler has to have an ideal and you supplied mine. You were like a model who strolls along just when it occurs to the painter that his landscape needs a figure to set it off. You don't mind, I hope?"

This made it necessary for her to assure him in as few words as possible that she did n't in the least object to his view of the matter; and she added, not without a trace of irony, that she was always glad to be of use; that if she could further the cause of art in any way she was ready to do it.

"Please don't; that hurt a little! By the way, the Poet told me I ought to know you. He recommended you in the noblest terms. I see now what was in his mind; he thought I needed your gentle chastening."

"It's more likely he thought it well for you to see your ideal shattered! It's too bad, for

the sake of your ambitions, that I did n't remain just an unknown girl in an orchard — who suggested Pomona inspecting her crops and then vanished forever."

"Oh, I had to know you; it was inevitable," he replied with irritating resignation. "You see I've written about you in prose, too; you've been immensely provocative and stimulating. My best prose, as well as my only decent jingles, has had you for a subject. I laid myself out to describe you at the tennis tournament last fall. Next to watching you run through an orchard trippingly, like one of Swinburne's long lines, I like you best when you show your snappy stroke with the racket and make a champion look well to her knitting."

She turned crimson at this, remembering very well the "Chronicle's" report of the tennis match, which she had cut out and still treasured in her portfolio. Clearly, her obligations to this impudent young man were increasing rapidly.

Marjorie, seized with an ambition to add a new tower to the château, opportunely demanded their assistance. The architectural integrity of the château was in jeopardy and the proposed changes called for much debate by the elders. This consumed considerable time, and after the new tower was finished by their joint labors they set Marjorie to work constructing a moat which Fulton declared to be essential.

He got on famously with Marjorie; and this scored heavily in his favor with Marian. His way with the child was informed with the nicest tact and understanding; he entered into the spirit of the château-building with just the earnestness that her young imagination demanded. He promised to take her canoeing to a place where he thought there might be fairies, though he would not go the length of saying that he had seen them, to be sure, for when people saw fairies they must never tell any one;

it would n't be kind to the fairies, who got into the most dreadful predicaments when human folk talked about them. Marjorie listened big-eyed, while he held her sandy little fingers. Yes; there was something pleasing in this young man, who described tennis matches for the sporting page of a newspaper or wrote verses or spoke of religion or fairies all as part of the day's work.

"The Poet will think I've fallen into the lake," he remarked presently. "The ride to Mrs. Waring's dock was a great concession on his part and he expressed misgivings as to allowing me to paddle him back to the inn. He's waiting at this moment on Mrs. Waring's veranda, hoping that I won't show up with the canoe so he can take passage on the steamer and reduce the hazards of the journey. The height of the sun proclaims the luncheon hour, and Marjorie must be hungry. Won't you honor my humble argosy!"

Marian could think of no good reason for declining this invitation, particularly after Marjorie had chirruped an immediate and grateful acceptance. Moreover, Mr. Fulton had made himself so agreeable and had contributed so many elements to the morning's pleasure, that it was not in her heart to be rude to him.

They embarked after a promise had been exacted by Marjorie that "ums" should all meet again on the morrow, to perfect the moat and build a drawbridge.

"I'm glad to have an excuse for staying," Fulton declared, "and I hope I'm not the man to go off and leave a noble shotum without the finishing touches. We shall meet frequently, maid Marjorie. In fact" — he lifted the paddle and let it drip with a pleasant tinkle into the calm water, while he half-turned toward Marian — "I don't believe I'll ever go back to 'the heat and dust and noise of trades.' As

old Walt says, in effect, the earth, that is sufficient; so why not stay close to it?"

"Ums splashed water on me!" protested Marjorie.

"A thousand pardons, my young realist!"

"The Poet and Elizabeth are waving to us from the landing," remarked Marian. "Perhaps you'd better save the rest of the peroration until to-morrow."

"No unkinder word was ever spoken!" cried Fulton cheerfully, and swept the light craft forward with long, splashless strokes.

VI

"It's beautifully kind of you to want to help; but you see how impossible it is!"

"I don't like that word," replied the Poet patiently. "Most things are possible that we really want to do."

For two hours that morning Mrs. Redfield and he had talked of her troubles, first with a

reluctance, a wariness on both sides that yielded gradually to the warmth of his kindness. However, on the whole, the Poet found her easier to talk to than her husband had been. She understood, as Redfield had not, that his appearance in the matter was not merely the assertion of a right inhering in an old friendship, but that it was dictated by something larger, — a resentment of an apostasy touching intimately his own good faith as a public teacher. This attitude had not only its poignancy for her, but it broadened the horizon against which she had been contemplating the broken and distorted structure that had been her life.

"I suppose," she said bravely, "that we ought n't to ask so much! We ought to be prepared for calamity; then we should n't break under it when the blow falls. When I saw other people in just such troubles I used to think, 'There's something that will never come to

me': I suppose Miles is right in saying that I have no ambition, that I had become merely a drag on him. And I can see his side of it; there was n't much ahead of him but standing behind a bank counter to the end of his days. The novels are full of the conflicts between the man who wants to rise and the woman without wings. It's my misfortune to be one of the wingless ones."

She was less bitter than he expected; and he took courage from this fact. He had hoped to avoid any minute dissection of the situation; but she had given him a pretty full account of the whole affair, and he was both dismayed and relieved to find how trivial the details of the dissension proved. She had wept — beyond doubt there had been tears — and Miles on his side had exhausted persuasion before her obstinacy kindled his wrath. The crux had come with his demand that she should do her part toward cultivating acquaintances that he be-

lieved to be essential to the success of his new undertaking. She had never known such people, she assured the Poet, feeling that he knew she never had and would sympathize with her position. Miles had no right to ask her to countenance them, and all that.

The Poet preferred to be amused by this. The obnoxious persons were strangers to him; he had merely heard of them; he admitted that he would never deliberately have chosen them for intimate companionship. And yet it was not so egregious a thing to sit at the same table for an hour with a man and woman one would n't care to meet daily.

"If there were n't such people as the Farnams in the world we'd never know how to appreciate our own kind of folks," remarked the Poet. "And that fellow can't be so bad. I heard only recently of an instance of his generosity — he made a very handsome subscription to the new children's hospital. Men of that

stamp frequently grow emotional when they're touched on the right chord."

"But you would n't have Miles — the Miles you used to know — become like that, or get down on his knees to such people in the hope of getting some of their money!"

The Poet chuckled.

"If Miles can pry that particular man loose from any of his money I'd say it proved that Miles was right and you were wrong! Farnam does n't carry his philanthropy into his business affairs. He's quite capable of eating your lobster to-night and to-morrow morning exacting the last ounce of flesh from the man who paid for it. It's possible that Miles will pay dearly for his daring; I understand that this new business is beset with pitfalls."

"Oh, I want him to succeed! He's free now to do as he likes and I hope he will prosper. At any rate, Marjorie and I are not dragging him down!"

Angry tears came with this; the Poet looked away to the green-fringed shores. When she was calm again he thought it wise to drop the matter for the present. At least it was best to withdraw to safe ground, from which it might, however, be possible to approach the citadel obliquely.

"Marian," he remarked, "is a charming girl."

She seconded his praise of her sister ardently, saying that Marian had been splendid throughout her troubles.

"She sees everything so clearly; I don't know what I should have done without her."

"She sees things your way, then," he ventured quietly. "I'm a little afraid we always prefer counselors who tell us we're doing the right thing."

"Oh, she reasons things out wonderfully. I hope she will profit by my troubles! Fortunately we're unlike; she's much more practical

than I am. She has a wider outlook; I think her college training shows there."

"We must see to it that she does n't make mistakes," said the Poet, his thoughts reverting to his efforts to place some new ideals where Marian might contemplate them without suspecting that he was responsible for putting them in her way. The humorous aspects of his intervention — and particularly his employment of the unconscious Fulton as a missionary — caused him to smile — a smile which Mrs. Redfield detected but failed to understand.

"I can never look on marriage again as I used to," she ventured. "Most of the good things of life have been spoiled for me."

"I can't agree to that: you are less than thirty, which is n't the age at which we can afford to haul down the flag. If I'd subsided at thirty, — had concluded that the world would never listen to my little tin horn, — I should have missed most of the joy of life.

And Marian at twenty-two must n't be allowed to say that the world at best is a dreary place. She must n't be allowed to form foolish opinions of life and destiny and call to the stage-hands to drop the curtain the first time some actor misses his cue. And do you know," he continued with the humor glinting through his glasses, "that girl had the bad manners to tell me to my face only a few days ago that there was no substance to all our poetizing — that the romance had been trampled out of life! To think of that — at twenty-two *or* thirty!"

"Well," said Mrs. Redfield, a little defiantly, "you must remember that *I've* tried poetry and romance."

It was clear from her tone that she thought this scored heavily on her side, and offset any blame that might attach to her in his mind. She was surprised by the quickness with which he retorted.

"Ah, but have you!"

This was rather discouraging when she had been at such pains to tell him the truth; when she had bared her soul to him. She felt that it was unchivalrous for him to question her fairness when she had been so frank.

"You can hardly say," he went on, "that you made much of a trial of romance when you dropped it at the first sign of trouble. Please don't misunderstand me. That letter you wrote me during your honeymoon from this very house was in a sense the declaration of a faith. You meant to live by it always; and if no troubles had ever come it would have been perfectly satisfactory — no doubts, no questions! You were like a mariner who does n't question his charts when the sea is calm; but who begins to doubt them when he hears the breakers roaring on hidden reefs. Ideals are no good if we have n't a tolerably strong faith in them. I'm going to tell you something that may sur-

prise you. You and Miles have been an ideal of mine. Not only was your house with its pretty garden and the hollyhocks a refuge, but it was one of my chief inspirations. A good many of the best things I've written came out of that little establishment. I was astonished the other day, in looking over my work of the past half-dozen years, to find how much of you and Miles there is in it. And now I feel that I ought to modify those things — stick in footnotes to say that the ideal home — the ideal of happiness I had derived from you — was all a fraud. Just think how that would look: an asterisk tacked to the end of every stanza, leading the eye down to an admission that my statements were not true, only poetry, romance, a flimsy invention which no one need be deceived by!"

"I hope," she said despairingly, "that I have n't lost everything! I've got to hold on to something for Marjorie's sake!"

"But Miles," he persisted, "what about him!"

"That is n't kind or fair," she replied, at the point of tears again. "If I've lost my ideals he's responsible! He's thrown away all of his own!"

"No, not quite! If he had he would n't have been angry at me when I went to him to discuss these matters!"

"So you've talked to him! Then, of course, you came to me prejudiced in his favor! I don't call that being fair. And if he asked you to talk to me —"

Her eyes flashed indignantly.

"It's rather funny that both of you should be so afraid of that. Nothing is further from the truth!"

"I know you mean to be kind, and I know it was n't easy for you to come to me. But you can see that matters have gone too far — after the heartache and the gossip —"

"The heartache is deplorable, and the gossip

is n't agreeable," he assented readily. "We must n't let the chatter of the neighbors worry us. Think how a reconciliation would dull the knives of the expectant cynics and hearten the good people — and they are the majority, after all —who want to see the gospel of happiness and love rule this good old world. As for things having gone too far, nothing's been done, no irrevocable step taken —"

"You don't understand, then,—" and there was a note of triumph in this,—"I've brought a suit; it will be determined in October."

"October," replied the Poet, with his provoking irrelevance, "is a month of delight, 'season of mists and mellow fruitfulness.' The warmth of summer still hovering; the last flowers challenging the frost to do its worst; plans for the indoor life of winter — the fire, cozy talks that are n't possible anywhere but at the hearthside; the friendly lamp and the neglected book calling us back. I don't think

you and Miles are going to have a very happy winter of it under different roofs. I'm sure I'll miss the thought of you, running upstairs on tiptoe when you thought you heard Marjorie. Miles was always reading Kipling aloud and we'd forget ourselves and laugh till you'd hush us and run away in a panic. You know," he continued, "your cottage was n't only a place for you to live in; it was my house of dreams — a house of realities that were dreams come true. I've sat by the table many a time when you did n't know I was there — an intruder stealing in, a cheerful sort of ghost, sensible of an unspoken welcome. Odd, is n't it, about the spirit of place? Not a great many places really take hold of most of us; but they have a way of haunting us; or maybe it's the other way round and we haunt *them*, and without knowing how we get into them. We explore strange frontiers into undiscovered countries; we cross from our own existences into other

people's lives, — lose identity, feel, see as other people do, — and then lift our heads, rub our eyes, and become our old selves again — but not quite. We are likely to be wiser and more just and tolerant. And it's discouraging," he went on, "to go to your house of dreams and find it plastered with 'for rent' and 'for sale' signs — or worse yet, to let yourself in with your old key to find only ghosts there! That's what I've been doing. Your bungalow is empty — doubly empty — for the last tenant did n't stay long; the ghosts were probably too much for him! But I'm there—in spirit, you might say. If the owner knew how much I loaf there, in a disembodied sort of fashion, he'd begin to charge me rent! But it's mighty lonesome — nobody around to dig out old songs and play the airs for me, as you used to, while I limped along with Miles's old banjo."

He spoke with a certain air of injury, as though after all he were the chief sufferer from

the passing of the old familiar faces from his house of dreams. He complained as a guest might who suddenly finds that his hosts have taken their departure without warning, leaving him sitting at their fireside all unconscious of their flight.

Elizabeth was surprised to find that his interposition in this fashion impressed her more than the counsels of other friends who, supporting her cause loyally, urged her to maintain her "stand" and recommended sharp reprisals. She had not recovered from her amazement that this shyest and most unobtrusive of men should have come to her in any guise; and when he spoke of his house of dreams — *her* house with its old-fashioned garden that contained the flowers he scattered oftenest through his poems — she was half-persuaded that he was really a sad, wistful visitor of this house of dreams — *her* house — that symbolized for him contentment and peace.

His way of stating the case touched her deeply, and seeing this he rose and walked to the veranda rail and scanned the limpid water.

"That looks like the boy I sent to do my fishing for me," he remarked. "He's bringing Marian and Marjorie home. A pretty capable boy, that! What do you think of a youngster who pops up out of nowhere and chucks bunches of verses into mail-boxes on crowded corners where any one with any sort of ear, passing along, would hear them singing inside! Let's go down and meet them."

On their way to the dock the Poet continued to talk of the young man in the canoe as though he were a great personage. His extravagant praise of Frederick Fulton justified any one in believing that either Shelley or Keats had stolen away from Paradise and was engaged just now in paddling a canoe upon Lake Waupegan. The Poet had risen from the long inter-

view with apparent satisfaction and was now his more familiar amusing self.

"How on earth did Marian get acquainted with this young man?" asked Mrs. Redfield in perplexity, as Fulton skillfully maneuvered the canoe inshore.

"Why assume that I know anything about it? Marian doubtless knows scores of people that I never heard of; she's not an old friend like you. I dare say he saw her wandering alone on the shore and at once landed and handed her a poem as though it were the advertisement of a ventriloquist billed for one night at Waupegan Town Hall! Very likely, being a girl of discriminating literary taste, she liked his verses and bade him welcome. And what could be more natural than that he should offer to bring her home! The longer I live the more I wonder that people meet who were always destined to meet. We think we're yielding to chance when we're really doing things

we've been rehearsing in our subconsciousness for a thousand years!"

When the party landed he parleyed with Marjorie to make it necessary for Marian to introduce Fulton to Elizabeth. He avoided Marian's eyes, and warily eluded the combined efforts of the sisters to detain him. The obvious result of his artfulness, so far as Marian and Fulton were concerned, was eminently satisfactory. The most delightful comradeship seemed to have been established between the young people. The Poet was highly pleased with his morning's work, but having dared so much he was anxious to retire while the spell of mystification was still upon them. Luncheon was offered; Mrs. Waring would soon be home and would be inconsolable if she found they had come in her absence.

"We are very busy — fishing," said the Poet as he entrusted himself with exaggerated apprehensions to the canoe. "When you have a boy

fishing for you you have to watch him. He'll hide half the fish if you're not careful."

"You absurd man!" cried Marian, with an accession of boldness, as Fulton swung the canoe round with sophisticated strokes.

"Ims a cwazy man," piped Marjorie; "but ims nice!"

VII

THE Poet was amusing himself the next afternoon with a book of Scotch ballads when Fulton found him, with his back against a big beech, apparently established for all time. The young man did n't know that the Poet was rather expecting him — not anxiously or nervously, in the way of people unconsoled by a sound philosophy; but the Poet had nevertheless found in the ballads some hint that possibly Frederick Fulton would appear.

Fulton carried a tennis racket and an old geography with the leaves torn out which served him as a portfolio. These encumbrances

seemed in nowise related to each other, a fact which called for a gibe.

"I telephoned down to the office last night and arranged to take my vacation now," Fulton explained. "In two weeks I can do some new poems to relieve the prose of my story and round it out. The lake's my scene, you know; I planned it all last September — and a lot of things will occur to me here that I'd never get hold of in town."

"There's something in that," the Poet agreed; "and by putting aside the pen for the racket occasionally you can observe Marian in her golden sandals at short range. And then," he deliberated, "if she does n't prove to be quite up to the mark; if you find that she is n't as enchanting as you imagined when you admired her at a distance, you can substitute another girl. There are always plenty of girls."

Fulton met the Poet's eyes squarely and grinned.

"So far my only trouble is my own general incompetence. The scenery and the girl are all right. By the way, you got me into a nice box showing her my verses! I suffered, I can tell you, when I followed your advice and paddled up in my little canoe and found her with those things!"

The Poet discounted his indignation heavily, as Fulton clearly meant that he should.

"Formal introductions bore me, and in your case I thought we'd do something a little different. From the fact that you're going off now with your scribble-book and racket to find her I judge that my way of bringing you to each other's attention has been highly successful. Pray don't let me detain you!" he ended with faint irony.

"I wanted to tell you," said Fulton, "that I've decided not to accept Redfield's offer; I've just written to him."

The Poet expressed no surprise. He merely

nodded and began searching for a knot in the cord attached to his eye-glasses.

"We can usually trust June with our confidences and rely on her judgments," he remarked pensively. "January is first-rate, too; February and March are tricky and unreliable. April, on the other hand, is much safer than she gets credit for being. But it was lucky that we thought of June as an arbiter in your case. If we would all get out under a June sky like this with our troubles we'd be a good deal happier. It was a bad day for the human race when it moved indoors."

The Poet, absorbed in the passage of a launch across the lake, had not applauded Fulton's determination not to ally himself with Redfield, as the young man had expected. Fulton felt that the subject required something more.

"I mean to stick to the newspaper and use every minute I have outside for study and writing," he persisted earnestly. "I've decided

to keep trying for five years, whether I ever make a killing or not."

"That's good," said the Poet heartily. "I'm glad you've concluded to do that. Your determination carries you halfway to the goal; and I'm glad you see it that way. I did n't want to influence you about Redfield; but I wanted you to take time to think."

"Well, I'm sure I should always have regretted it, if I'd gone with him. And now that I've met Mrs. Redfield, I'm fully convinced that I'm making no mistake. It does n't seem possible —"

He checked himself, and waited for a sign from the Poet before concluding. The Poet drew out and replaced in the ballads the slim ivory paper-cutter he used as a bookmark.

"No, it does n't seem possible," he replied quietly. "It was just as well for you to see her before making up your mind about going in with Redfield." (His own part in making it pos-

sible for Fulton to meet Mrs. Redfield at this juncture was not, he satisfied his conscience, a matter for confession!) "Of course their affairs will straighten out — not because you or I may want them to, but because they really need each other; or if they don't know it now they will. I'm inclined to think Marian will help a little. Even you and I may be inconspicuous figures in the drama — just walking on and off, saying a word here and there! None of us lives all to himself. All of us who write must keep that in mind; — our responsibility. When I was a schoolboy I found a misspelled word in a book I was reading and I kept misspelling that word for twenty years. We must be careful what we put into print; we never can tell who's going to be influenced by what we write. Don't let anybody fool you into thinking that the virile book has to be a nasty one. There's too much of that sort of thing. They talk about warning the innocent; but there's not much

sense in handing a child the hot end of a poker just to make it dread the fire. There are writers who seem to find a great joy in making mankind out as bad as possible, and that does n't help particularly, does it? It does n't help you or me any to find that some man we have known and admired has landed with a bump at the bottom of the toboggan. But," he ended, "when we hear the bump it's our job to get the arnica bottle and see what we can do for him. By the way, I'm leaving this afternoon."

"Not going — not to-day!" cried Fulton with unfeigned surprise and disappointment.

"As I never had the slightest intention of coming, it's time I was moving along. And besides, I've accomplished all the objects of my visit. If I remained any longer I might make a muddle of them. I'm a believer in the inevitable hour and the inevitable word. 'Skip' was the first word that popped into my

head when I woke up this morning. At first I thought Providence was kindly indicating the passing of a prancing buccaneer who began pounding carpets under my window at 5 A.M.; but that was too good to be true. I decided that it was in the stars that I should be the skipper. Unless the innkeeper is an exalted liar my train leaves at four, and I shall be occupied with balladry until the hour arrives. We must cultivate repose and guard against fretfulness. There's no use in trying to hasten the inevitable hour by moving the dial closer to the sun. If you're not too busy you might bring Marjorie and Marian over to see me off. It would be a pleasant attention; and besides, I should be much less likely to miss the train."

VIII

Mrs. Redfield, Marian, and Marjorie were back in town by the first of July. The sisters had taken a small house on a convenient side

street and were facing their to-morrows confidently. Mrs. Redfield was to open a kindergarten in October and Marian was to teach Latin in a private school. Fulton still clung to the manuscript of his romance for the revision it constantly invited. Since returning to town he had seen the Poet frequently, and had kept that gentleman informed of the movements and plans of Mrs. Redfield and Marian.

The Poet wandered into the "Chronicle" office one humid afternoon and found the reporter writing an interview with a visiting statesman. On days when every one else complained bitterly of the heat, the Poet was apparently the coolest person in town.

"I hope you have enough raisins in your pudding to spare a few," he remarked. And then, as Fulton groped for his meaning, he drew an envelope from his pocket. "I took the liberty of purloining a few of those things you gave me a month ago before I passed them on to

Marian, and here's the 'Manhattan Magazine' kindly inclosing a check for fifty dollars for four of them. I suggested to the editor that they ought to be kept together and printed on one page. If you don't like the arrangement, you can send back the check. I'd suggest, though, that you exchange it for gold and carry the coins in your pocket for a day or two. The thrill of the first real money you get for poetry comes only once. Of course, if you're not satisfied and want to send it back —"

He feigned to ignore the surprise and delight with which the young man stared at the slip of paper in his hand while he tried to grasp this astonishing news.

"Send it back!" he blurted, breaking in upon the Poet's further comments on the joy of a first acceptance. "Send it back! Why, they've sent me back dozens of better pieces! And if it had n't been for you — Why," he cried, with mounting elation, "this is the grandest thing

that ever happened to me! If I was n't afraid of getting arrested I'd yell!"

"Of course," continued the Poet calmly, "I had to tell the magazine people that you made your sketches from life — and that they might get into a libel suit by printing them. I suppose you're hardly in a position to ask Miss Agnew's leave to print! You have n't been seeing much of her, of course!"

An imaginary speck of mud on his umbrella engaged the Poet's attention at the moment so that he missed the color that deepened in Fulton's face.

"Oh, I've seen a good deal of Miss Agnew," he confessed, "both at the lake and since I've come home. We do some tennis together every afternoon I can get off. I suppose there might be some question as to using the poems without asking her about it. Very likely no one would ever guess that she inspired them — and yet I have a guilty feeling —"

You know, of course; and she, being, we will say, a person of average intelligence, knows, too, perfectly well. There you have it — a very delicate question! And the fact that she does n't care for such foolishness as poetry and romance makes a difference. You've got to consider that."

His insinuations had been of the mildest, but his keen scrutiny marked the flash of resentment in Fulton's eyes.

"Well, she was very nice about my putting her into the story. It did rather stagger her at first — to know that I had been worshiping from afar, and grinding rhymes about her for a year without ever knowing her."

"The enchantment was n't all a matter of distance, I hope," the Poet persisted. "I was n't quite sure about her. She struck me as being a little bitter; seemed to think life a string of wrong numbers and the girl at the exchange stupid and cross. I should be sorry if you got

any such notions from her; it could n't fail to make your ideal totter on its pedestal. It would be rough to find that your Pomona, in shaking the boughs in the orchard, was looking for an apple with a worm-mark in its damask cheek. It would argue for an unhappy nature. We must insist that our goddesses have a cheerful outlook; no grumbling when it rains on the picnic!"

"Well," Fulton admitted, "she did seem a little disdainful and rather generally skeptical about things at first; but I met that by rather overemphasizing the general good that's lying around everywhere, most of which I got from your books. Her father had lost his money, and her sister's troubles could n't fail to spoil some of her illusions; but she's going into her school-teaching with the right spirit. She's been reading the manuscript of my story and has made some bully suggestions. I've rewritten one of the chapters and improved it vastly

because she pointed out a place where I'd changed the key a little — I must have been tired when I wrote it. I'd rather got off the romantic note I started with and there were a dozen dead, pallid pages right in the middle of the thing."

"She was afraid the romantic element flagged there?" asked the Poet carelessly.

"Well, I suppose that's about what it came to. My heroine and the hero had a tiff; and I was giving the girl the best of it and making *him* out unreasonable; and she said she thought that was n't fair; that the trouble was all the girl's fault. She thought the girl should n't have been so peevish over a small matter when the young orchardist had shown himself chivalrous and generous. It seemed to be Miss Agnew's idea that when you go in for romance you ought to carry through with it."

The Poet's attention seemed to wander, and he suppressed a smile with difficulty. He then

began searching his pockets for something, and not finding it, remarked:—

"People who never change their minds are n't interesting; they really are not."

"Well, I'm glad enough to change mine," replied Fulton, not knowing what was in the Poet's mind; "and I hope I'll never get to a place where I can't take criticism in the right spirit."

"Oh, I was n't thinking of you," remarked the Poet.

He rose and moved quickly toward the door, as though to escape from Fulton's renewed thanks for his kind offices in disposing of the verses.

"Don't work yourself to death;" he warned Fulton in the hall. "I'm glad Marian's influence is so beneficent. When your proof comes, hold it a day or two; there's always the chance of bettering a thing."

IX

As September waned, Fulton heard disquieting news touching Redfield. It was whispered in business circles that the broker had, the previous year, sold stock in a local industrial venture that had already come to grief. Redfield's friends were saying that he had been misled by the enthusiasm of the men who had promoted the company, but this was not accepted at face value by some of his business rivals. Fortunately the amount was not large — a mitigating circumstance for which he was not responsible; he would have sold more, it was said, if investors had proved less wary. The story was well calculated to injure if it did n't at once destroy Redfield's chances of success as a dealer in securities.

Fulton was a good deal disturbed by these reports, which it became his duty to sift for the "Chronicle." Fulton liked Redfield; Redfield was a likable person, a good fellow. The effect

upon his future of this misfortune, attributable to his new-born zeal for money-making, was not to be passed lightly. There was nothing for the papers to print, as the complaining purchasers had been made whole and were anxious to avoid publicity. Fulton had watched matters carefully with a view to protecting Redfield if it became necessary, and he was confident that the sanguine promoters were the real culprits, though it was pretty clear that any scruples the broker might have had had gone down before the promise of a generous commission.

When quite satisfied that Redfield was safe so far as prosecution was concerned, Fulton spoke of Redfield's difficulties to the Poet on an evening when he called ostensibly to report the completion of his romance. The Poet listened attentively, but the reporter accepted his mild expressions of regret as indicating indifference to Redfield's fate. The young man's remark that if it had n't been for the Poet he would

have shared Redfield's collapse elicited no comment. The Poet, imaginably preoccupied with less disagreeable speculations, turned at once to Fulton's manuscript. After the final draft had been discussed and publishers had been considered, the young man left in the cheerful mood he always carried away from his talks with the Poet.

But the Poet spent a restless evening. He listlessly turned over many books without finding any to arrest his interest. He was troubled, deeply troubled, by what Fulton had told him of Redfield. And he was wondering whether there might not be some way of turning his old friend's humiliation to good account. A man of Redfield's character and training would feel disgrace keenly; and coming at a time when he believed himself well launched toward success, the shock to his pride would be all the greater.

Nothing in the Poet's creed was more brightly rubricated than his oft-repeated dec-

larations that the unfortunate, the erring, the humbled, are entitled to mercy and kindness. The Redfields' plight had roused him to a defense of his theory of life; but Fulton's story had added a new integer that greatly increased the difficulty of solving this problem. Seemingly Fate was using these old friends to provide illustrations for many of the dicta that were the foundation of his teachings. Inspiration did not visit the quiet street that night. The Poet pondered old poems rather than new ones. "Life is a game the soul can play," he found in Sill; but the chessmen, he reflected, are sometimes bafflingly obstinate and unreasonable.

"To-morrow is All-Children's Day," remarked the Poet a few days later when, seemingly by chance, he met Fulton in the street; and when the young man asked for light the Poet went on to explain. "When Marjorie was born her father and I set apart her birthday to

be All-Children's Day — a crystallization of all children's birthdays, from the beginning of time, and we meant to celebrate it to the end of our days. It just occurs to me that you and I might make it an excuse for calling on Mrs. Redfield and Marian and Marjorie to-morrow afternoon, the same being Sunday. Very likely you have another engagement —" he ended, with provoking implications that caused Fulton, who was already pledged to visit Marjorie and inferentially Marian and Mrs. Redfield on this very Sunday afternoon, to stammer in the most incriminating fashion.

"Then if you have n't anything better to do we can call together," said the Poet.

It would have been clear to less observant eyes than the Poet's that the reporter was on excellent terms with the household, and even if the elders had tried to mask the cordiality of their welcome, Marjorie's delight in Fulton was too manifest for concealment. She transpar-

ently disclosed the existence of much unfinished business between herself and the young man that pointed irrefutably to many previous and recent interviews.

"Inside is no good for houses," Marjorie was saying, as the Poet accommodated himself to the friendly atmosphere; "nobody builds houses inside of houses."

This suggestion of the open was promptly supported by Fulton; and in the most natural manner imaginable Marian was pressed into service to assist in transferring building-materials to the few square yards of lawn at the side of the house. September was putting forth all her pomp and the air was of summer warmth. Marjorie's merry treble floated in with the laughter of Marian and Fulton. They were engaged with utmost seriousness in endeavoring to reproduce with blocks the elaborate château of sand, sticks, and stones that had been their rallying-point on the shores of Waupegan.

The Poet, left alone with Mrs. Redfield, noted the presence in the tiny parlor of some of the lares and penates that had furnished forth the suburban bungalow and that had survived the transfer to the flat and the subsequent disaster. They seemed curiously wistful in these new surroundings. As though aware that this was in his mind, Mrs. Redfield began speaking of matters as far removed from her own affairs as possible. The Poet understood, and, when the topics she suggested gave opportunity, played upon them whimsically. The trio in the yard were evidently having the best of times; and their happiness stirred various undercurrents of thought in the Poet's mind. He was not quite sure of his ground. It was one thing to urge charity, mercy, and tolerance in cloistral security; to put one's self forward as the protagonist of any of these virtues was quite another.

The Poet rose, picked up a magazine from

the center table, scanned the table of contents, and then said, very quietly, —

"Miles is in trouble."

He watched her keenly for the effect of this, and then proceeded quickly: —

"It's fortunate that the jar came so soon; a few years later and it might n't have been possible for him to recover; but I think there's hope for him."

"What Miles does or what he becomes is of no interest to me," she answered sharply. "He did n't feel that there was any disgrace to him in casting Marjorie and me aside; his pride's not likely to suffer from anything else that may happen to him."

"He's down and out; there's no possibility of his going on with the brokerage business; he's got to make a new start. It's to be said for him that he has made good the losses of the people who charged him with unfair dealing. I'm disposed to think he was carried away

by his enthusiasm; he was trying to get on too fast."

In spite of her flash of anger at the mention of her husband's name, it was clear that her curiosity had been aroused. Nor was the Poet dismayed by a light in her dark eyes which he interpreted as expressing a sense of triumph and vindication.

"I suppose he's satisfied now," she said.

"I fancy his state of mind is n't enviable," the Poet replied evenly. "Life, when you come to think of it, is a good deal like writing a sonnet. You start off bravely with your rhyme words scrawled at the top of the page. Four lines may come easily enough; but the words you have counted on to carry you through lead into all manner of complications. You are betrayed into saying the reverse of the thing you started out to say. You begin with spring and after you've got the birds to singing, the powers of mischief turn the seasons upside

down, and before you know it the autumn leaves are falling; it's extremely discouraging! If we could only stick to the text — "

His gesture transferred the illustration from the field of literary composition to the ampler domain of life.

She smiled at his feigned helplessness to pursue his argument further.

"But when the rhyme words won't carry sense, and you have to throw the whole thing overboard —" she ventured.

"No, oh, no! That's the joy of rhyming — its endless fascination! The discreet and economical poet never throws away even a single line; there's always a chance that it may be of use." He was feeling his way back to his illustration of life from the embarrassments of sonneteering, and smiled as his whimsical fancy caught at a clue. "If you don't forget the text, — if you're quite sure you have an idea, — or an ideal! — then it's profitable to

keep fussing away at it. If a bad line offend you, pluck it out; or maybe a line gets into the wrong place and has to be moved around until it fits. It's all a good deal like the work Marjorie 's doing outside — fitting blocks together that have to go in a certain way or the whole structure will tumble. It's the height of cowardice to give up and persuade yourself that you've exhausted the subject in a quatrain. The good craftsman will follow the pattern — perfect his work, make it express the best in himself!"

And this referred to the estrangement of Miles Redfield and his wife or not; just as one might please to take it.

"Miles has gone away, I suppose," she remarked listlessly.

This made the situation quite concrete again, and any expression of interest, no matter how indifferent, would have caused the Poet's heart to bound; but his face did not betray him.

"Oh, he will be back shortly, I understand.

I rather think he will show himself a man and pull his sonnet together again! There's a fine courage in Miles; unless I've mistaken him, he won't sit down and cry, even if he has made a pretty bad blunder. A man hardly ever loses all his friends; there's always somebody around who will hand a tract in at the jail door!"

"You don't mean," she exclaimed, "that Miles has come to that!"

"Bless me, no!" the Poet cried, with another heart throb. "The worst is over now; I'm quite satisfied of that!" he answered with an ease that conveyed nothing of the pains he had taken, by ways devious and concealed, to assure himself that Miles had made complete restitution.

"A man of cheaper metal might have taken chances with the law; I'm confident that Miles was less the culprit than the victim. He sold something that was n't good, on the strength of statements he was n't responsible for. I believe

that to be honestly true, and I got it through men who have no interest in him, who might be expected to chortle over his misfortune."

"In business matters," she replied, with an emphasis that was eloquent of reservations as to other fields, "Miles was always perfectly honorable. I don't believe anybody would question that."

It had n't entered into the Poet's most sanguine speculations that she would defend Miles, or speak even remotely in praise of him. Wisdom dictated an immediate change of topic. He walked to the open window and established communication with the builders outside, who had reproduced the Waupegan château with added splendors and were anxious to have it admired.

X

Indirection as a method and means to ends has its disadvantages; but it is not to be scorned

utterly. A week following Marjorie's birthday children idling on their way home from school in Marston grew silent and conferred in whispers as a gentleman whose name and fame had been interwoven in their alphabet lounged by. He turned with a smile to lift his hat to an urchin bolder than the rest who shouted his name from a discreet distance.

Within a few days the signs had vanished from the Redfield cottage and the weeds had been cut. As the Poet opened the gate, Fulton came out of the front door: neither seemed surprised to see the other. The odor of fresh paint elicited a sniff of satisfaction from the Poet, a satisfaction that deepened a moment later as he entered the studio and noted its neatness and order.

"Mrs. Waring sent a maid out to do all this, and lent me the things we needed for the tea-table," Fulton explained. "I had hard work to persuade her this was n't one of your jokes.

I had harder work to get Mrs. Redfield to come and bring Marjorie; but Marian supported the scheme, and brought Mrs. Redfield round. I fell back heavily on your argument that Marjorie ought to have a final picnic before the turn o' the year — a last chance to build a shotum ready for knights to come widing."

"Marian is a persuasive person, I imagine," the Poet remarked. "By the way, I shall be a little late arriving. Myers, the artist, lives a little farther down Audubon Road and I want to have a look at his summer's work. Nice fellow; good workman. Redfield promised to meet me there; I want to be sure he does n't run away. We don't want the party spoiled after all the work we've done on it."

"I wonder," Mrs. Redfield remarked, over the tea-table, "who has bought the place?"

"A trust company, I think," replied Fulton, glancing through the broad north window of

the studio with careful dissimulation. "As I passed the other day I saw that the grounds had been put in order, and decided that this would be just the place for a picnic."

"This little house would be nice for my playhouse; and we could use that big window to watch ums knights come widing."

"That chimney used to roar the way you read about," remarked Marian. "I think every house ought to have a detached place like this, for tea and sewing and children to play in."

Mrs. Redfield, ill at ease, was attending listlessly to the talk. Fulton's explanation had not wholly explained. She had agreed to the excursion only after Marjorie had clamorously insisted upon the outing her devoted cavalier had proposed. Marjorie's comments upon the broad yard, her childish delight in the studio playhouse, touched chords of memory that jangled harshly.

Fulton was in high spirits. His romance had been accepted and a representative of the publishing house was coming to confer with him about illustrations.

"They say it won't break any best-selling records, but it will give me a start. The scoundrels had the cheek to suggest that I cut out some of my jingles, but I scorned such impiousness in an expensive telegram."

"I should hope so!" cried Marian approvingly. "The story's only an excuse for the poems. Even the noblest prose would n't express the lake, the orchard, and the fields; if you cut out your verses, there would n't be much left but a young gentleman spraying apple trees and looking off occasionally at the girls paddling across the lake."

"You do my orchardist hero a cruel injustice," protested Fulton, "for he saw only one girl — and a very nice girl she was — or is!"

"What on earth are you two talking about?"

asked Mrs. Redfield, looking from one to the other, while thwarting Marjorie in a forbidden attack upon the cookies. "It seems to me that you've been talking for years about this story, and I don't know yet what it's all about."

"Hims witing books like the funny poetry man, and hims told me if I'm good and nice to you and Aunt Marian he'll wite a book all about me, and my dollies, and how we builded shotums by the lake and in our yard; and Marian can't be in any more books, but just be sitting on a wock by the lake, having ums picture painted."

"Thank you, Marjorie; I knew he was a deceiver and that proves it," laughed Marian, avoiding her sister's eyes. "Let's all go out and see the sun go down."

Marjorie toddled off along the walk that bisected what had once been a kitchen-garden.

The sun was resting his fiery burden on the dark edge of a wood on the western horizon.

THE POET

The front door of the bungalow was ajar and Mrs. Redfield crossed the piazza and peered in. The place was clean and freshly papered; a fire burned in the fireplace — no mere careless blaze of litter left by workmen, but flaming logs that crackled cheerily. Her memory distributed her own belongings; here had been the table and there the couch and chair; and she saw restored to the bare walls the pictures that now cluttered the attic of the home she had established with Marian, that had once hung here — each with its special meaning for the occupants.

She stood, a girlish figure, with her hands thrust into the pockets of her sweater, staring with unseeing eyes at the mocking flames.

The Poet had spoken of the visits he paid in fancy to his house of dreams, and she half-wondered whether she were not herself a disembodied spirit imprisoned in a house of shadows. A light, furtive step on the piazza

startled her, and lifting her eyes with the Poet still in her mind she saw him crossing the room quickly, like a guest approaching his hostess.

"It's pleasant to find the mistress back in the house of dreams," he said. "And she brings, oh, so many things with her!"

He glanced about the empty room as though envisaging remembered comforts.

"I might have known," she murmured, "that this was your plan."

"No," he replied, with a smile that brought to his face a rare kindliness and sweetness, "it was n't mine; I'm merely an inefficient agent. It's all born of things hoped for —"

He waved his hand to the bare walls, brought it round and placed something in her palm.

"There's the key to my house of dreams. As you see, it needs people — its own people — Marjorie and you, for example, to make it home again. I shall be much happier to know you're back. . . ."

ELIZABETH !

He was gone and she gazed after him with a deepened sense of unreality. A moment later she heard Marjorie calling to him in the garden.

She stood staring at the flat bit of metal he had left in her hand, the key of his house of dreams; then she laid her arms upon the long shelf of the mantel and wept. The sound of her sobbing filled the room. Never before — not when the anger and shame of her troubles were fresh upon her — had she been so shaken.

She was still there, with her head bowed upon her arms, when a voice spoke her name, "Elizabeth," and "Elizabeth," again, very softly.

. . . . . .

The sun flamed beyond the woodland. The Poet joined with Marian and Fulton in praising the banners of purple and gold that were flung across the west, while Marjorie tugged at his umbrella.

"It's all good — everything is good! A

pretty good, cheerful kind of world when you consider it. I think," he added with his eyes on Marian, "that maybe Miles can find time to do the pictures for Fred's book. His old place at the bank won't be ready until the first of the year, and that will give him a chance to work up something pretty fine. I'll see that publisher about it when he comes; and —" He withdrew several steps, and looked absently at the glories of the dying day before concluding, "it's just as well to keep all the good things in the family."

When they hurried to the gate, they saw him walking in his leisurely fashion toward the trolley terminus, swinging his umbrella. The golden light enfolded him and the scarlet maples bent down in benediction.

THE END

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